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OR,
Sleuth Against Sleuth.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "FLASH DAN," "DENVER DUKE,"
"COOL COLORADO," "KEEN KENNARD,"
"MAJOR BLISTER," "CAPTAIN COLD-GRIP," "LUCIFER LYNX," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
NUMBER 772.

"WHEN will we get there, father?"
"Before long, child."
"I don't want to pass the night in the mountains."
"You shall not."
"Thank Heaven! when this long journey has ended, we shall rest. Rest! how sweet the word sounds!"
The parties who carried on this brief dialogue were in the heart of the mountains almost midway between Denver and Leadville.
The sun had declined far toward the western horizon, and the shadows of the tall pines darkened the trail over which the couple, a man and young girl, rode two good horses.

IT WAS QUICK WORK, FOR THE RUSSIAN SLEUTH UNDERSTOOD THAT AGILITY WAS NEEDED THERE AND THEN.

"We must be near Silver Deck," the man suddenly continued. "They told me in Denver that, by traveling at a certain gait, we would reach it within a given time, and, according to my calculations, we should not be far away."

He spoke in drooping spirits as if he feared that night would overtake them in the mountains, and when he glanced at his companion, beautiful, but weary looking, and pale, his countenance got a troubled expression.

The sun sunk lower and disappeared altogether, a brief twilight followed, and then night came.

"We shall have to fight the darkness here," the girl exclaimed. "Oh, why *did* we ever undertake this awful trip?"

"For safety, Medora," was the reply, and the man leaned toward her and touched her arm.

He was past the middle milestone of life and was handsome. There was about him a look of dignity which no circumstances could lower. His abundant hair was still black, but here and there were gray threads in his beard.

"You heard me, Medora?" he went on, looking into the face near at hand. "I said that we have made this long journey for safety. Think what I have endured."

"Just as if I can ever forget it," was the answer. "Father, you must not accuse me of wanting in love for you. Do not torture me with suspicion. I am willing to pass to-night in these strange mountains if you are with me. But, what is your light? Is it our destination?"

The man raised his head and looked over the hand the girl had extended. There was hope in her face now, and her eyes were brilliant, even dancing.

"It is Silver Deck! I am sure of it!" cried the gentleman. "The old hills won't find us shelterless to-night. Forward!" and he touched the horses with spur and hand, and the next moment they were galloping over the trail.

Half an hour later, the couple rode into what was known as Silver Deck, a mining-camp of some proportions and notoriety. The mountains were around it, and the giant pines lifted their heads far above the clustering cabins.

Silver Deck was not a good retreat. The four-horse stage that lumbered over the trail between Leadville and Denver seldom brought it a passenger, and when it did, he never tarried long.

Not that the camp had a good name, for it had not, but somehow-or-other, it did not suit strangers, and was famous for keeping a certain class of citizens whose sole aim in life was to get money out of the bonanza-bearing hills that hemmed it in.

In a little while the two steeds were reined in before a cabin with a well-lighted interior, and the man leaned toward the door and gave a clear "Hello!"

The portal was opened, and a big man with a long black beard and dressed in coarse shirt and pantaloons, the ends of the latter in his boots, made his appearance.

He started slightly on seeing his callers, but came forward and stopped at the man's knee.

"You are Million?" asked the mounted person.

"I am Mark Million," was the reply.

"We are all right, child," said the father, glancing at the daughter. "I will help you down."

The miner who had owned to the name of Mark Million still looked surprised, but in a moment he stepped to the young girl's horse and assisted her to the ground.

In the light that streamed from his cabin by the open door, he saw that she was extremely beautiful in face and figure.

"Your horses will stand, for they are tied," he remarked to the father. "Come in and rest, this is Silver Deck; no Frisco, of course, but *that's* hospitality *hyer* all the same."

The gentleman acknowledged the invitation with a bow, and the next minute the two travelers entered the cabin.

Mark Million, with his intensely black eyes still regarding them, shut the door behind him.

"We have come here to rest," said the stranger, wheeling upon him. "We want to hide from the world without. This young lady is my daughter, Medora."

"How did you know enough to ask if I was Mark Million, and to stop at the right cabin?" cried the miner.

"By instructions received in Denver."

"Oh, you came down, then?"

"Yes."

"You will let us rest here, won't you?" put in the girl; and Mark Million felt a thrill run through him as the tips of her fingers fell upon his arm. "Nobody ever comes to Silver Deck, they say. It has but little communication with the outside world. We will see nobody here, thank heaven!"

"I don't understand all this," was the reply, bluntly spoken.

Medora turned to her father.

"You will, by and by," he ejaculated, meeting the miner's gaze. "You have never been hunted over leagues of snow and ice, you have not traversed a continent with the bloodhounds of an empire at your heels. No! You have experienced nothing of this kind!"

"You don't know me," smiled Mark Million.

"You are liable to meet some strange people in

the Wild West. Hunted, eh? Well, maybe I have been hunted—"

"Then you know how to sympathize with me!" cried the man. "I am Grant Thurston; but let me tell you, I don't intend to throw myself on the charity of Silver Deck. I am willing to go into the mines—the mines! My God! what thoughts they bring up to me!"

The next instant the speaker grew deathly pale, and Medora sprang to him with a cry.

Before she could reach his side, he tottered away, and all at once fell like a death-struck person across a little cot!

"His old attack," cried the girl, turning to Mark Million. "It overcomes him when he thinks about what he has suffered. No! Do not go for a doctor. He will be himself again in a few minutes. I am glad that we have finished the journey. Perhaps his life here will keep those horrible spells off."

The miner was looking at the unconscious man on his cot, and not at the fair speaker.

All at once he slipped forward and picked up the lamp from the table.

Medora watched him as he stooped and held it near the face of Grant Thurston, which was white and deathlike.

She seemed to hold her breath.

"This must be the man," muttered Mark Million. "He gave himself away when he spoke of the mines. There can be no mistake. No wonder he wants to get away from the world outside—that he seeks rest after the experience he has had! Grant Thurston, eh? Well, I don't blame him for dropping the name which he must have learned to hate."

When the miner drew back and restored the light to the table, he encountered the keen inquisitive gaze of Medora.

"I see what you think!" exclaimed the girl. "You have recognized him."

A strange smile passed over Mark Million's face.

"Yes," he answered, lowering his voice to a whisper, "I know that man."

Medora stood before the miner like a person under a spell. Her breath came and went in gasps, and her color faded until her cheeks were white.

"Then I beg of you, in the name of all that is sacred to you in this world, to keep our secret," she suddenly exclaimed. "This is our last hope—our last resort. We have come to Silver Deck to hide from the trail dogs of two worlds. For myself I care not, but for the miserable man yonder I do care. Yes, he is the person you take him to be."

A gleam of curiosity grew in Mark Million's eyes, and he leaned toward Medora while it flashed.

"What is his number?" he asked.

The girl drew back.

"You needn't tell me if you don't want to," he went on. "He had no name *over there*!"

"No; they take even that from a man and give him a number. I need not keep it back from you since you know him. If you were to bare his left shoulder you would see branded there the figures 772!"

"I thought so," returned the miner of Silver Deck. "But was not this unusual disgrace?"

"It was the work of a man who hated the very ground he trod!" cried Medora. "I pray Heaven to bring us face to face some day. I would live a hundred years in torture to see once more Paul Demidoff, the Scorpion of the Palace!"

At these words her figure seemed to increase in proud stature, and Mark Million, glancing down, saw her hands clinched.

"How came you to know him?" Medora suddenly continued. "You never saw him before."

"Not now, girl," answered the miner. "Know that I have heard of Number 772, that his history, or a part of it, is as well known here in Silver Deck as it is in—shall I say in St. Petersburg?"

"But, how many know it here?"

"Mark Million."

"No one else?"

"No one else."

"Then the secret is safe!" exclaimed Medora. "We shall baffle the sleuths of the Old World and the New."

"Where have you been all this time?"

"Where haven't we been?" exclaimed the girl. "Now in the city, now in the mountains. Hounded from one place, we hunted another. There has followed us like a shadow of doom the reptile of the palace. We were happy twice, but all at once the sky disappeared, and danger encompassed us. Then it was flight—always flight! There is now on our trail the keenest sleuth we have ever fought. Ah! you must have heard of him, Mark Million. They say he never fails."

"Who is he, Medora?"

"They call him Captain Coldgrip!"

Mark Million's teeth met.

"I've cause to know that king of spotters!" he growled.

CHAPTER II.

FOUND OUT.

WHEN Grant Thurston recovered from his swoon, he found the face of Medora close to his.

They were the only occupants of Mark Million's cabin, and the girl said that it was to be their future abode.

The miner of Silver Deck had announced his intention of taking another shanty which happened to be empty at the time, and he had been some time away when Thurston awoke.

"Did he know me?" was the exile's first question. "I lost my powers when I thought about the mines. Tell me, Medora, what Mark Million said?"

The girl was outspoken.

She glanced first at the door, and then replied in a whisper:

"He knows us, but the secret is safe in Silver Deck. And, what is almost as good, he doesn't like Captain Coldgrip."

Grant Thurston was silent for a moment.

"I think we can trust Mark Million," he replied at length. "Medora, my child, there must be somebody in the world worthy of being trusted. I wonder how he came to know me?"

"He would not tell, but he intimated that it was no great secret."

"Why does he hate Claude Coldgrip? Did he give his reasons, Medora?"

The young girl shook her head.

"Well, we'll try Silver Deck: we will rest, and—and defy them here!" and the last words seemed to come out through the speaker's clinched teeth. "I will be a Silver Dealer to all intents and purposes. I will work for our daily bread, Medora, and if they find us—if this sleepless, untiring sleuth of America ferrets us out, we will fight here to the death. But how can he find us now?" and Thurston's eyes brightened with hope. "We have given him a blind trail for six months. You recollect that we disappeared in a manner which would deceive a Vidocq. Ah! my child, we are safe at last. I am going to feel so. Silver Deck, worked by Mark Million, will stand at our back, and the secret of my identity is safe in the breast of the Colorado miner. We have outwitted the palace scorpion at last. This is not Siberia, Medora. This is America, and not the knout-shadowed realms of a merciless czar!"

Medora with clasped hands and with an expression of thankfulness on her face, heard him through, and when she rose and went to the door to see that there were no listeners at hand, a smile chased all sadness from her face.

Safe at last!

At that very moment the figure of Mark Million, the boss miner of Silver Deck, entered a cabin near the center of the camp and stood face to face with a woman who greeted him with a faint smile.

This person was older than Medora, and although her face told that she had passed much of her life among wild men and wild scenes, she was strikingly handsome with her black eyes and Gypsy-hued skin.

"You've got a rival at last, Coral," began Mark. "Haven't I told you all along that one would come by-and-by?"

"What do you mean?" cried the woman. "I haven't been sitting up to hear a riddle, Captain Mark."

The miner laughed.

"I mean that Silver Deck has just received two new citizens."

"By the stage?"

"No; they came horseback, down the stage trail from Denver."

"Who are they?"

"A man named Thurston and his daughter. The girl is remarkably beautiful, if I'm to be counted a judge, and her father is by no means bad-looking."

"Where are they?"

"At my cabin. As they have come to stay, I have told the daughter that they could keep possession of it, and I would transfer my effects to Cyclone's place, which he will not occupy any more."

The woman called Coral looked at Mark several moments without replying.

"I don't like this increase of citizenship," she said, slowly. "Where are they from?"

"I have just said—from Denver."

"Yes, but before that?" was the quick retort.

"I do not know," answered Mark, coldly.

"But I want to ask you about Cyclone."

"What about him?"

"He saw you last before he went away?"

The woman nodded.

"Did he say anything about coming back?"

"He did not."

"Do you think he will ever return?"

"Ah! that is quite another question, Captain Million!" cried Coral, and then she clinched the well-shaped hand that rested on the table at her side. "What makes you so anxious about Cyclone? Do you want him to come back?"

"No!" And then Mark caught himself and colored. "That is, Coral, since he has taken it into his head to leave, I grant him an eternal leave of absence."

"Which means that you don't want him here! I understand you pretty well, Mark! I reckon Coral of Silver Deck has not lived here with her eyes shut. Cyclone will not come back unless he chooses to. There, captain, isn't that eminently satisfactory?" and the woman showed her pearly teeth in a laugh.

"That is all," replied Mark Million, drawing back. "I only wanted to satisfy myself because I am about to take possession of Cyclone's cabin."

"You are very kind to give up yours to total strangers. What drives them to Silver Deck?" The word "drives" seemed so terribly appropriate that Mark started.

"Yes, they have been driven hither," he mentally exclaimed. "Coral hit the nail fairly on the head that time. Driven from pillar to post by the sleuths of two continents! But here they rest. Here they will be safe, despite the coolness and the cunning of the great American shadower, Coldgrip."

When Mark Million left the woman he went to the cabin he had selected for his new quarters. Next day he installed himself therein and Silver Deck, as a whole, knew that it had two new citizens.

Grant Thurston had been introduced to the miners, and all had received him with a frankness and cordiality that seemed to touch him.

As for Medora, she went naturally to Coral, who, besides herself, was the only woman in the isolated camp. Coral received her with a certain reserve which was not broken for some days, and when at last Mark Million saw the two fraternizing like women destined to be friends, a sunbeam seemed to shine in his breast.

"Who is that woman called Coral?" asked Grant Thurston one evening as he and Mark walked from the mines a little behind the rest.

"We don't know much about her," was the answer.

"She has lived here a long time, hasn't she?"

"Three years."

"Why does she remain?"

"The life, the society suits her, I presume," smiled the miner, and then he followed up his answer with a question that startled Thurston.

"Do you think you have met her somewhere?"

"I think—I have," replied the hunted man.

"But she was not Coral then."

"Oh, perhaps not. A great many of us have two names in this western country. Can't you think when and where you have encountered Coral?"

"It seems a dream. I will think about it. I will try to recall the circumstances."

"I wish you would. It might be important."

Thurston walked on in silence, his chin on his breast, and his brain in deep thought.

More than once Mark Million studied him from beneath his black lashes, and just before they separated to go to their respective cabins he said eagerly:

"Try to figure it out, Thurston. I don't want to cause you any uneasiness, but if you met Coral anywhere before striking Silver Deck, it may mean something; that's all."

"That is true, Mark. We've been here four months and no sleuth-hounds yet," and a smile came unbidden to Thurston's lips as if it naturally belonged to the words just spoken.

"Four months to the very day," was the answer.

"I'll set my head to work over Coral," the exile continued; "I'll get Medora to help me. She has a splendid memory—"

"No; do no such thing!" broke in Mark.

"The girl is happy. I don't want a suspicion to make her sad. Think it out for yourself."

"I'll do it!" assured Thurston. "I'll go over my life day by day since the trial in St. Petersburg; ay, I'll go back further than that. If I solve the mystery I'll come to your cabin."

"That will do," and the two men separated.

The four months that had followed the coming of father and daughter to Silver Deck had passed almost without incident.

The father had donned the rough clothes of the miner, and, shoulder to shoulder with the toughs of Colorado, he had wrenched the precious ore from the subterranean walls. If the miners noticed how well he handled the pick, if they sometimes stopped and listened to him talk about mines and mining, they thought that he was "an old hand at the business," and that he had mined before coming to Silver Deck.

Mark Million guarded his secret well. His discovery made on the night of Thurston's arrival had not passed his lips.

Nobody but himself knew that he had stationed a man in Leadville and one in Denver. These two towns were the gates by which Silver Deck was reached from the east and the west.

His outposts were men of courage and cunning, and Mark had instructed them to communicate at once with him if a certain man reached either town.

"If Captain Claude Coldgrip, the sleuth, comes near I want to know it," the Silver Deck miner, had said more than once to himself, and when he spoke thus his eyes would get a flash that told of a tiger's nature under his exterior.

Grant Thurston went direct to his cabin after leaving work, and with his promise to recall the past on his mind, he scarcely noticed Medora and threw himself on the cot at hand.

"What is it, father?" cried the girl.

"I want to think! There is something that must be thought out!" was the answer. "Let me alone for awhile, child. Go out, ramble through the town. Give me one hour of uninterrupted thought."

The girl obeyed, and her kiss was still damp on Thurston's brow when the door shut behind her.

"Now, fortune, for once be my friend!" exclaimed the hunted man. "Clear my head and let me see the past, even to the underground hells of Siberia!"

Then all grew silent in the cabin, and the little lamp which Medora had left burning on the table, threw its light over the motionless figure of Thurston on the cot.

At last that silence was broken by the pistol-like crack of a whip, and a vehicle rolled by.

It was the stage just in from Denver, a little late, but, then, it had no set time for arriving.

"At last!" cried Thurston, leaping suddenly to his feet. "I have solved the enigma! I see the woman now as I saw her then. It is all clear!"

He seized his hat and bounded toward the door; but, just then, it was opened in his face, and Medora was before him.

What! Was this pale, wild-looking girl his daughter?

Medora sprung toward him with a shriek.

"Father!—father! God pity us now. He—has—come!" and Grant Thurston held a dead weight in his arms!

CHAPTER III.

AS QUICK AS EVER.

Not far from the time of these occurrences in Silver Deck, a man who demands our attention came to Leadville from the Southwest.

He made no display of any kind, and when he reached the town, then full of wild life and wilder bustle, he allowed nothing to surprise him.

Leadville was enjoying flush times; the mines were yielding without stint, and everybody was pushing over the road to wealth.

There were daily arrivals of speculators, miners, roughs, and people of every description. The few and insufficient hotels were overflowing, and hundreds, eager to strike it rich, were willing to sleep in the open air.

The man we have mentioned as coming to Leadville from the Southwest, had a look about him that stamped him more than an ordinary individual.

He was not a speculator, neither did he look like a common miner, and there was nothing of the mountain tough in his appearance.

He had been in Leadville before, for when he alighted from the old stage whose four horses had brought him in, he walked straight to a public house known then as the Nugget Hotel.

It was near night, and the mines had discharged their inmates who swarmed the streets on the eve of the nocturnal carouse by which they generally celebrated their freedom from pick and shovel.

"I'm sorry, but I'm full," remarked the landlord of the Nugget Hotel to the stranger we have met. "Leadville is enjoying her boss boom, and if things go on this way a while longer, 'Frisco 'll be nowhar! You want to invest right away if you wish to take time by the forelock. Oh, we're going up like a rocket."

"To come down like a stick, colonel?"

"No, sir! This is permanent. Why, Denver's knocked into the shade already. How much do you want to invest?"

"I'll look around first," answered the stranger with a smile at his lips.

"I'll give you pointers when you want 'em. I've got a few shares to sell myself, though I'm not telling everybody. There's the Sally Ann Bonanza, the Skinned Catfish, or the—"

Crack! crack! crack!

Three revolver-shots in quick succession!

The next moment the half-dozen occupants of the Nugget's office were at the front door.

The stranger was not the first to reach the threshold, but he was there soon enough to see a man rise from the ground, stagger back, and fall again, with a heavy revolver clutched in his hand.

"Major Daisy got the drop on Comanche, at last," some one said. "I guess that settles the dispute over the White Rose Mine."

A crowd had already collected, and while one-half looked at the dark-shirted man lying on his face in the dust of Leadville, the others were listening to his slayer, who was proclaiming the provocation which had led to the catastrophe.

The quarrel of the two men, Major Daisy and Comanche, was no new thing to Leadville. The wonder was that it had not ended sooner.

Major Daisy was a handsome but dark-faced man of forty. He was the perfection of physical manhood as he stood in the street a few steps from his victim. His appeal to those who had witnessed the affray had been answered by words that confirmed his statements.

It was clearly a case of self-defense. Comanche had made the first move, the first shots had been fired at the same moment; but Major Daisy's second bullet had terminated forever the rivalry over the White Rose Mine.

After the fight the victor entered the Nugget and invited those present to the bar.

As he turned to see that none were to be slighted, his eyes met those of the stranger who had lately arrived by stage.

"Walk up. It is on me," he exclaimed, walk-

ing over to where the new arrival stood, but the next moment he continued in lower tones:

"I was not looking for you. I think I know what brings you back. I'll see you in a minute."

Five minutes later the two men stood face to face in one of the small houses of Leadville.

"You haven't been here for some time?" from Major Daisy.

"No."

"You never come only when you want somebody."

"That seems to be the case," was the reply.

"And you want somebody now?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, if Captain Coldgrip wanted Major Daisy, he'd conclude that he'd be taken. Do you expect to find your victim in Leadville?"

The stranger was Claude Coldgrip, the Sleuth. He made no reply for a moment. He tipped his chair toward the Leadville miner and smiled.

"One can find almost everybody here, major."

"That's a fact, I guess I'm the only one in town who recognizes you. Colonel Blevins, of the Nugget, did not, eh?"

"No. He wanted to sell me some shares—"

"In the Sally Ann Bonanza?"

"Yes."

"That's his hobby. Why, the whole thing isn't worth a dollar! He ought to know you, captain. When you were here last you were his guest. That was three years ago, and time has dealt gently with Claude Coldgrip. But come. Can I help you any now?"

"I don't know," answered the spotter. "Do you know Mark Million?"

"The man who slipped through your fingers when you were last here?"

"That's the man."

"He is now the head boss of Silver Deck, the exclusive camp between here and Denver."

"Have you ever been there?"

"I have not."

"Then you don't know anything about its people?"

"But very little. There's a man in town, though, who knows 'em all."

"Who is he?"

"They call him Cyclone. He lived there for two years, but he's lately shaken himself off, and of late he's been proprietor of the Wildcat, here in town."

"When did he quit Silver Deck?"

"About five months ago."

"In good humor?"

"I don't know."

Captain Coldgrip's eyes seemed to get a look of satisfaction.

"The Wildcat is the old Catamount. You know where to find it," Major Daisy went on.

"For some reason Cyclone changed the name when he reopened it. You'll find him there, ready to play or talk, just as it suits you. I'd rather not go down just now, after what has happened. It had to come to a settlement 'twixt Comanche an' me, and for the first time in my life, captain, I'm sorry that I had to defend a lot o' rock to the extreme o' taking a human life. If Colonel Blevins has no room for you, remember that Major Daisy's latch-string is out."

"I am liable to quit Leadville at any time."

"Big game, eh?" ejaculated the miner.

"Yes, gigantic game!" smiled the detective.

"This is the greatest trail of my life, major."

"Is it for murder?"

"It is for more than one crime. I am not the first person who has taken up the trail."

"An old scent?"

"Not so old of late," was the answer, as Captain Coldgrip rose. "I'll find Cyclone at the Wildcat, eh?"

"At the Wildcat. You need not ask which is he, for your knowledge o' men will enable you to pick him out at a look."

Claude Coldgrip was once more on the streets of Leadville, and not long afterward he entered a place known as the Wildcat, the most orderly gaming-den of the mountain city.

Here Cyclone had rested after deserting Silver Deck, and here he had established himself, and was making money so rapidly that he was thinking of going to 'Frisco and setting up on a still grander scale.

The New York detective entered the Wildcat with his eyes on the alert for its proprietor.

"Heavens! here at last!" ejaculated a man who was seated facing the door by which Coldgrip entered the long faro room where several tables were fringed with players. "There's no other man living who looks exactly like him, and Mark Million put me on guard here because I've seen the famous sleuth. There is no time to be lost. Captain Coldgrip is ready for his swoop upon Silver Deck, and the people there must be warned."

Standing near one of the tables was a man whose looks and dress stamped him a person of some importance there.

"That is Cyclone," decided the detective, and then he was met by the person just observed who, sure enough, proved to be the Wildcat's proprietor.

Cyclone, who had a pleasing exterior, never mistreated any of his callers. Nobody was

ever asked to play, but it was expected that all who crossed his threshold did so for the purpose of tempting fortune there.

Suddenly the man who had noticed the detective's entrance announced that he was through. Luck had not favored him lately, and his last bet, which was quite large, had been risked on an unlucky card.

"I can go now," he exclaimed, getting up to have his seat taken immediate possession of by an anxious spectator. "The horse can be saddled in a moment; then I'm off."

Captain Coldgrip and Cyclone had retired to a little room which was known as the latter's office, and the gambler, Mark Million's watch, had free swing.

He slipped from the house and hurried through the street.

"I don't have to stay to see what he's after!" he mentally exclaimed. "My orders were to break for Silver Deck the moment he came to Leadville. I think Mark wants to shield Grant Thurston and Medora. Maybe he wants to protect himself, for, if I'm not mistaken, he's had a tussle with Captain Coldgrip."

Just back of the Nugget was a low building where some horses were kept.

The Silver Deck spy went straight to it. He knew where his horse was, for he went in without a light, jerked a lot of equipments down in the dark, and got a fiery animal ready for a ride.

It was the work of a minute, and with an exultant gleam in his eye he led the horse into the starlight.

"Now, sir, my cunning captain, Bolivar Blink will steal his first march on you! I guess this is the first gun of the campaign. You can fire the next an' be hanged!"

An agile leap upward and he was fixed in the saddle.

"Now I'm off! Good-by, Leadville!"

"One moment, sir!" said a startling voice at his knee. "I want to see you before you set out for Silver Deck."

Bolivar Blink almost lost his seat in the saddle. He looked downward with a cry he could not suppress, for the man at his horse was Captain Coldgrip himself!

CHAPTER IV.

THE COLDGRIP CLUTCH.

THE famous detective had made one of the quick moves for which he was noted.

This is how it had come about.

No sooner had he heard the door of Cyclone's private room shut behind him, than he asked:

"Are you the only Silver Deck man in Leadville to-night?"

"No; there is another—the man at the further end of the table along the right wall," was the answer.

Captain Coldgrip went to the door and opened it.

"The man is not there!" he exclaimed, after a look into the faro-room.

"Then he has just left."

"Who is he?"

"Bolivar Blink."

"Mark Million's friend?"

"Mark Million's man!" replied Cyclone.

A certain thought flashed across the sleuth's mind.

"I'll talk to you later, Captain Cyclone," he cried. "I want to see Bolivar Blink."

"He's got a horse in the stables behind the Nugget."

"That is enough!" and the proprietor of the Wildcat found himself suddenly deserted by the man who had not even given his name.

This is how the New York detective came to appear to Mark Million's man when fairly in the saddle for Silver Deck. He had gone straight from the faro den to the stables by a route not wholly unfamiliar to him, and his sudden appearance alongside the horse had taken his rider's breath.

Bolivar Blink wondered what would be the next move, and he was not kept in suspense.

"Get down, Bolivar," suddenly continued Coldgrip. "I want to see you before you go to Silver Deck."

"Can't you see me whar I am?" was the retort.

"Not as I want to see you. Will you come down?"

There was more in the last sentence than a mere interrogative. Despite the poor light, the Silver Decker thought he saw a flash in the eyes that watched him.

A moment later he threw his leg over his steed's neck, and slipping to the ground, stood before the spotter.

"I'm here, cap'n. What might it be?" he asked.

"How are affairs at Silver Deck?"

"Silver Deck? You seem to know that—"

"That you were going thither? Yes, I know it. Now, Mr. Blink, we will go into the Nugget. This is no place for an interview."

"Go ahead," answered the miner-sport with the air of a man who had made a certain resolve which he was sure he would keep.

The horse was turned into the stable, and Captain Coldgrip led Bolivar toward the little hotel.

"I've got a slippery fellow in my fingers," he mentally exclaimed. "Bolivar Blink has made up his mind that he is going to start for Silver Deck to-night, and I am resolved that he shall not. We will see who comes out first best."

The appearance of Captain Coldgrip and his prisoner created no stir in the "office" of the Nugget, and when the detective asked the landlord for a private room, they were shown to a small affair at the top of a few steps.

"Sit down, Bolivar," began Coldgrip, and the crossed spy dumped himself upon a chair with an emphasis that drew a smile to the detective's lips. Then he leaned back, crossed legs and arms, and looked triumphantly at the man in his front.

"You have not told me how things are at camp?" resumed Coldgrip.

"What if I should not choose to do so?"

"You can refuse if you like."

"Well, I guess I'll take the benefits o' that privilege. I know you, although you haven't introduced yourself. You are Captain Claude Coldgrip, who had a famous campaign once against Injun Nick."

The detective did not start at this unmasking. He had seen from the first that Bolivar Blink knew him.

"And you were waiting for me!" he exclaimed, looking straight at the Silver Decker.

"Who told you?"

"Never mind, Bolivar."

"Cyclone did not know."

"Cyclone did not tell me," was the quick response. "You can't say that the proprietor of the Wildcat betrayed you. When you saw me enter the faro-room you said to yourself: 'Now I go back to Silver Deck.' The pickets have been driven in, eh, Bolivar?"

The miner-spy said nothing.

This man seemed to have read his very thoughts. He had seen Captain Coldgrip before, had heard wild stories of his cool exploits; but he had never had the distinction of a personal encounter with him.

"I've got to sharpen my wits to beat this fellow!" he exclaimed to himself. "I rather wish Mark had stationed somebody else here."

"I've had a good time in Leadville, but Captain Coldgrip has actually come! And I fear I can't match him!"

For several seconds the detective seemed to wait for Bolivar to recover from his confusion, then he leaned slightly forward and sent a shell into the enemy's camp. "Bolivar Blink, eh? Since I've been looking at you, I see some familiar old lines. What ever became of Baxter Street Joe, who dropped out sight all at once some years ago?"

The chair hardly held the Silver Decker, for he almost left it with a cry at the question.

"Ah! I thought I had found an old acquaintance," continued Coldgrip. "What in the world are you doing out here? Bolivar Blink? Let me see—five years ago it was Dock Dingle. Now we can converse like old friends. I hope you've struck it rich, Bolivar. They say times are flush just now. Is it so with Silver Deck?"

Always back to the name Bolivar Blink did not want to hear!

"My friend, Mark Million, is there, I believe? He is said to be the boss of the camp, which tells me that he is in easy circumstances. Wants to see me, I presume?"

"I don't see why he should, Coldgrip," snapped the miner spy. "You were asking about Baxter Street Joe. I drop the mask, for there's no use in trying to deceive you. I am Dock Dingle, but I'm trying to make it honest out here in Colorado."

"I see, and I'm glad of it, Bolivar," smiled Coldgrip.

"Well, Joe isn't far away, but he's making it honest, too," continued Mark Million's man.

"When did you leave Silver Deck?"

"Some time ago."

"How were the new-comers getting along?"

In an instant Bolivar Blink's face became as blank as a wall.

"What—new-comers?" he asked.

Captain Coldgrip had to fix his most penetrating gaze upon the fellow.

Was he deceiving him, or had he (Coldgrip) sprung a genuine surprise?

"I know of no new-comers," declared the Silver Decker, catching his breath.

"Ah! I see. You don't want to give anything away. I presume it was a general pledge, that they were not to be betrayed under any circumstances?"

"I don't understand you, Coldgrip."

"Then you do not know that some time ago a man and his daughter came to Silver Deck."

Bolivar shook his head.

"You do not know that they did not go any further."

"By Jupiter! you are putting in the mystery now!" broke out Bolivar. "A man and his daughter in Silver Deck? When did they get there, captain, and who are they?"

"You know nothing about them?"

"Nothing."

Bolivar Blink was assuming the air of a witness who cannot be turned by questioning.

"Well," suddenly laughed the detective, "what do you know, Dock Dingle?"

"Nothing about the people you ask after. I guess I'd know it if such parties came to Silver Deck."

"You were very knowing in Gotham," was the answer.

"You and your fellows thought I knew too much, and that's why I left!"

Coldgrip made no reply to the remark which brought the speaker's teeth into plain view, but threw a glance out of the little window at his left.

"I have bluffed him!" inferred Bolivar. "After all, the famous Coldgrip was not hard to handle."

The next moment the New York spotter turned upon him, and Bolivar saw his eyes glisten as he leaned slightly forward.

"Would you start for Silver Deck if I were to let you go?" he asked.

"Haven't I a right to go back there?"

"And hasn't Claude Coldgrip a right to claim the two thousand dollars' reward offered for Dock Dingle, who is wanted thousands of miles from here for an infamous crime?"

Bolivar Blink sprung up and upset the chair as he started back.

"No hand at your belt, sir!" were the words that met him, and at the drop of an eyelash he found himself looking into the revolver of the Down-East sleuth. "Crime is never outlawed with Claude Coldgrip. I am not powerless in Leadville, as you shall see if you attempt to cross me. I can march you down to the marshal, and, by speaking a dozen words, have you held till I am ready to take you back to your old haunts. I believe I will."

It was the last resolve the man from Silver Deck wanted to hear from the spotter's lips.

He knew the Marshal of Leadville, and he knew, too, that he would like to hold till doomsday any inhabitant of Silver Deck, because he had lost heavily at Cyclone's tables.

Once in the hands of the Marshal of Leadville, and he would never see the camp in advance of Captain Coldgrip.

"Hang it all! I can go the other way!" suddenly exclaimed Bolivar. "I can go to Frisco."

"But you would not."

"You haven't tried me."

"Then let us see," smiled the detective. "We will go down now, Bolivar—you in advance, if you please!"

Sullen but watchful, the tough from Silver Deck went down the stair before the cool man who had cornered him. He did not look, but he knew that Captain Coldgrip's fingers were wound about the butt of a six-shooter.

The two passed into the street.

"To the south, Bolivar!" commanded the sleuth, and the Silver Deck sport started off with the left arm of the successful ferret almost touching his right.

"You don't know anything about the man and his daughter? It is rather singular," continued Coldgrip with an amusing glance at his prisoner.

Bolivar Blink, alias Dock Dingle, said nothing.

All at once Captain Coldgrip called to a man who stood in the light of a lamp hanging over a saloon door.

The person spoken to came forward.

"It is the Devil-Marshal of Leadville!" secretly growled Bolivar. "Captain Coldgrip is too much for me, I see."

CHAPTER V.

THE ACCUSED SHADOW.

"WHO has come? In heaven's name tell me, Medora!" exclaimed Grant Thurston, looking down into the white face that rested on his arm. "Has the city sleuth found us at last? Is Captain Coldgrip here?"

There was no reply to his questions clothed in agony, and wondering what could have happened, the father bore the young girl to the cot and then turned with a blanched and anxious face to the door.

He had heard the Denver stage rattle by, and he knew from Medora's reappearance so soon after its arrival that it had brought some very unwelcome person to Silver Deck.

He feared to go out and leave Medora alone, yet he burned to know who had come.

If he had witnessed the arrival of the stage, he would have seen two passengers alight when it drew up in front of its usual stopping-place.

Both were men, but there was a difference in their ages. One had reached his fortieth year. He was powerfully built, had deep-set black eyes and a tawny skin. His face was covered with a curly beard, as dark as his eyes, and, despite his physique, he was as active as a youth of twenty.

The other must have been a dozen years younger. He, too, was good-looking, frame well knit, brown eyes, and a well-kept mustache.

Medora, in her stroll while her father was trying to recall where and when he had first seen Coral, saw the stage stop and the two passengers alight.

The young man got out first; there was nothing about him that startled the young girl. But, when she saw the big personage spring nimbly to the ground, all color instantly left her

face, and, with a startling cry, she turned and fled back to the cabin. One look at the big man was enough!

The driver of the stage told the few men that witnessed its arrival that it had been detained in the mountains by a slight accident. He intended to change horses and push on to Leadville, as the younger passenger wanted to go on at once.

What about the big man?

Oh, he was going to stay a while.

He was a man of means who wanted to buy a mine. This was all the driver seemed to know, and while he busied himself about his relay, the large man made himself familiar with the rough, dark-shirted citizens of Silver Deck, who did not reply to his commonest questions without thought.

"Look hyer, Baldy; what about your passengers?" asked Mark Million, as his hand fell suddenly upon the driver's shoulder.

"Which one?"

"Both. Who are they—their names, I mean?"

"The giant calls himself Colonel Redpath."

"Whar did you get him?"

"In Denver."

"At the hotel?"

"At the Grand Colorado."

"Did he fraternize any coming down?"

"He rode about ten miles alongside o' me."

"Inquisitive?"

"Somewhat. That man is no slouch, Mark."

"That can be seen after sundown," admitted the boss miner of Silver Deck. "Is he looking for a mine?"

"Says he is."

"Did he talk much about mining, or about something else?" and Mark Million dropped his voice to a significant whisper as he finished.

"He asked about them in a roundabout way," answered Baldy, the stage-driver.

"And you told 'im, what?"

"I didn't forget my instructions; you can bet your head on that, Captain Mark. I told 'im that I knowed o' no such persons in Silver Deck."

"Good!"

"It seemed to stun him for a little while, then he went off on the mine lay again; but by and by he came back as adroitly as you please. I war ready for him, though, and he didn't get a bit o' satisfaction from this galoot."

"Now, what about the young man?"

"He's a different person, and I think the two never met till they stepped into my vehicle before the Grand Colorado. His name is Mortimer."

"Mortimer what?" asked Mark, with suddenly displayed eagerness.

"I don't know, sir. He doesn't intend to stop here. Business takes him to Leadville, and as he's paid me extra for a fast trip, that's why I want to get off. Our accident in the mountains was caused by a linch-pin dropping out. The wheel rolled off and the stage toppled over. When we found the pin after a long hunt, Mortimer and I couldn't lift the stage up. 'Let me try, gents,' said Colonel Redpath, and he raised 'er without half-tryin'. That man is the strongest one I ever saw, and in my time I've tested muscles o' steel."

"That confirms his identity!" mentally decided Mark Million. "This man is not Captain Coldgrip, but he is as dangerous. I did not tell my spies to look out for him, for I did not think he would come."

When the Silver Deck miner walked back, he saw Colonel Redpath complacently smoking a cigar before the double cabin whose owner sometimes made an honest dollar lodging a stray traveler or prospector.

The young passenger had gone back to the stage and was waiting for Baldy to come up with the fresh horses so that the trip could be resumed.

"The secret is safe!" assumed Mark Million as he eyed the big man. "But, it must be rendered doubly so by a flight to the retreat."

He bent his steps toward Grant Thurston's cabin, but, as his hand moved forward to open the door, it opened in his face.

"Have you seen him?" cried Thurston clutching Mark's arm. "In heaven's name, which one is it?"

"It isn't Captain Coldgrip, that is certain."

"Then it is the other, the sleuth-hound of the Old World, the Serpent of the Palace!"

"Do you think so?"

"Did not Medora see him?" cried the man. "One glance drove every vestige of color from her face, and she came back to announce him, and to fall senseless into my arms. Look at her now. She is quiet enough, poor child, but it is because I gave her a sleeping potion. What is he like? Tell me, Mark. Is he as big as a giant, but a handsome Satan, for all that?"

Mark Million could see the devouring excitement that Thurston labored under, and while he took a mental photograph of Colonel Redpath for his single auditor, his lips twitched nervously as if in pain.

"It is he!" cried Thurston, clinching his hands. "Medora always said that she would show him the blood of our house if she ever encountered him, but I am glad she did not betray

our hiding-place to-night. The man is on the trail, else he would not be here. Was ever a young girl so mercilessly followed, or a father so ruthlessly hunted by a human hound? I can not think of him being so near without feeling my blood boil!"

The next moment Thurston leaped toward a coat that hung over Medora's bed and snatched a revolver from a belt that was concealed by it.

"Why not end the hunt here now?" he cried, his eyes on fire as he wheeled upon Mark Million who was looking at him like a hawk. "You can bury the Russian scorpion in the mountains, or throw him to the vultures—I care not which!"

An instant later Thurston sprung across the little room, but, quick as a flash the miner's right hand darted forward and closed on his wrist.

"Not now, sir!" he said sternly as he met Thurston's wild look. "This man is no easy prey. From what you have told me of him from time to time, I know that he has the strength of a lion and the agility of a cat. He wouldn't hesitate to kill you in your tracks—to end the long persecution here in a manner distasteful to us all. No meeting with Colonel Redpath to-night!" And Mark pushed Thurston back and gradually relaxed his grip.

The man sunk upon a chair and buried his face in his hands.

Mark Million watched him in silence until, when he seemed to be calm, he uncovered his face and looked up.

"We must go to the retreat," resumed the miner gently.

"Has it come to this?"

"Yes."

Thurston's lips met firmly, but he made no reply.

"The place is no palace, Thurston, but it is as good a home as this."

"Great God, no! I can see the sunlight here; there I will always think of that other hell where without a name I lived for years seeing no sun. But it is for Medora's sake that I consent. When do we go?"

"Right away."

"I see! Before the sleuth of Russia can find us. You are quick to act, Mark. When Medora first came, I thought she had found Captain Coldgrip, the American spotter; but this monster—I was not expecting him!"

By this time Baldy the driver had changed his team, and the stage was about to start off on its night trip over the other part of the trail.

The young passenger had said good-by to Colonel Redpath, and the old Jehu in a merry mood, was gathering up the lines.

"Don't forget my message!" shouted Colonel Redpath to the youth in the stage.

"I'll attend to it!" was shouted back as the vehicle started, and the following moment the team dashed away in a cloud of dust.

Not long afterward Mark Million was seen moving among the miners of Silver Deck.

"Silence is the game!" he whispered at the ear of each, and more than one man when he heard the words threw a glance toward Colonel Redpath who was watching a game in the one gambling den of the mountain camp.

"Don't I know that I am suspected?" mentally queried the giant. "As sure as there's a sky over this camp, I'm on the trail. I told him I'd never leave it until I had won. I am within striking distance of the game. I have out-hunted, outwitted Claude Coldgrip who lost the secret thousands of miles from here. And if I can't beat a mountain gang like this, I'll go home and bare my back to Kratopkin's knout!"

At last Colonel Redpath retired to the little room he was to occupy, and the men of Silver Deck came together in secret caucus.

It was of short duration, and when it broke up every man knew just what was expected of him.

"Silence" was the talismanic words which the lips of Mark Million impressed on all, and when he left the place of meeting he walked to Coral's house and went in.

"Well, how do you like Silver Deck's new guest?" exclaimed the woman, and her eyes sparkled.

"How do you like him, Coral?"

"I?"

"Ah! woman, you know that man, and if you love life, you must seal your lips with silence!"

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT CORAL KNEW.

CORAL, of Silver Deck, at first gave Mark Million a look of surprise; but she saw that the bronze boss of the camp was not trifling.

"What brought him here, do you think?" she asked.

"You ought to know as well as I," was the answer. "Now, give me a little information, Coral. Go ahead."

"In the first place, what about Grant Thurston's guilt?"

"Ha! you have left the new arrival already!" laughed the woman. "You don't keep one subject long, I see, Captain Mark!"

"Never mind," retorted the miner, quietly. "Answer my question."

"What do I think about Grant Thurston's

guilt, eh? I have never admitted that I heard of the man before he came to Silver Deck."

"But you *had* heard of him. You knew him quite well. Listen to me Coral: A few years ago you lived in one of the most prominent cities of the world. You were then the wife of an American who had acquired some notoriety in a peculiar way. In the same city lived a man who was arrested one night by the police, charged with a crime which, in almost any other country, would have cost him his head. In that country, Russia, the abolishment of the death penalty saved to him that precious member. You knew the man arrested, and your husband was sometimes a visitor at his house. You know all about the trial; your husband must have retailed to you the evidence day after day. You are aware that the principal witness against the accused was a man called Count Paul Demidoff, supposed to be a secret spy near the person of the czar. The Nihilists and others called him the Scorpion of the Palace. Now, Coral, what I want to know is this: Was Grant Thurston guilty?"

Coral had heard Mark Million through without a word, and when he reached his important question, her eyes had a look he had never before seen in them.

"Where did you get all this?" she demanded.

"From the prisoner himself, from the man sent to the Siberian mines by what he calls a conspiracy, headed by Paul Demidoff."

"From Grant Thurston, now here?"

"Yes. He finally located you; but he says you have changed much in the years that have elapsed. He did not know you at first."

"But I knew him the moment I saw him!" exclaimed Coral. "Isn't it astonishing that we who saw each other last in St. Petersburg, should come together in Colorado? Guilty? Yes, Mark Million, Grant Thurston did the deed!"

The woman spoke with a voice that seemed to take the miner's breath.

"There can be no doubt of it?—nothing to say in his favor?"

"Not a word!"

Mark Million was silent for a moment.

"Why, then, does the Russian bloodhound pursue him?" he suddenly asked. "Is he not satisfied with the punishment Thurston has already suffered? The Siberian mines are worse than death, but here Colonel Redpath, or Paul Demidoff, the Palace Scorpion, tracks his victim to the wild heart of the American continent. That is not all. An invincible sleuth of our own country has been on the trail. Russian money has set Captain Coldgrip at work—"

"Where is he?" cried Coral with a start.

"He may be a thousand miles away; he may be very near; but, never mind that. Grant Thurston has a child who is pure and beautiful. She believes in her father's innocence."

"That is natural you know," put in Coral.

"She says that Paul Demidoff began his persecution because her father possessed a secret which, if promulgated, would send the Scorpion himself toward the mines."

"I don't believe that. If Grant Thurston had known such a secret, he would not have gone to Siberia with it locked in his bosom. Would you have done so, Captain Mark?"

"By heavens, no! I would have crushed the viper ere I went; but all men are not alike. The principal actors of the drama are here. Colonel Redpath no doubt thinks himself hot on the trail; but he is not to find the exiles. He is not to discover that they have been here. They are no longer in Silver Deck."

Coral started with a light exclamation of amazement.

"You have sent them off!" she cried.

"No difference! they are not here," was the quiet but firm answer. "You are likely to meet the Russian sleuth; he will probably recognize you. A meeting for a confidential talk will follow."

"If I want one," added Coral with a smile.

"Favor him," exclaimed Mark. "Throw him off the scent; tell him that Grant Thurston and Medora never came to Silver Deck. You know how to handle the czar's Scorpion. Let him know in the manner that suits you best, that we don't want spies here, especially Russian spies. I want this done, and the whole camp is at my back. We intend that the exiles shall not fall into the clutches of the detectives. Captain Coldgrip cannot come here without my knowledge. I was not prepared for Paul Demidoff, but, as he is here, he must be baffled and got rid of as soon as possible."

"He is cool and dangerous," admonished Coral.

"I have heard so. The girl, Medora, would have shot him dead to-night if she had been armed when she first saw him. I am not afraid to play against the Russian. He will find that he can't carry things in Silver Deck as in St. Petersburg. Recollect now. When you meet him throw him off the scent; send him to 'Frisco—anywhere! Good-night, Coral."

Mark Million left so suddenly that the woman in the cabin could not reply.

"What a persistent tracker the Scorpion is!" she exclaimed before the footsteps of the boss miner had died away. "I am to throw him

off because Mark Million wants to shield the two exiles—for what? Ah! Captain Mark, I am not so blind that I cannot see through the flimsy curtain you hang before your inventions. I am to send him away! Well, I have no objections to doing that, for I don't want the shadow of the Russian spy across my path just now. But, what if he refuses to go? what if he knows that the exiles settled here? I can summon another person to the scene. At a word from me Cyclone will close 'The Wildcat' in Leadville, and turn his face toward Silver Deck. I may summon him; but I will see what turn affairs take. I wonder whether the two have fled? Mark would not tell me. Oh no; he could not trust Coral. Well, Captain Mark, can you expect serfdom in return?"

As for Mark Million, he went back to the camp's one gaming-room where several tables had a few late players.

At one sat Colonel Redpath with a determined adversary, and the eyes of Mark singled him out before he was a yard from the door.

The boss miner advanced to the table, and standing over the players, began to watch the game, but more especially the man who had suddenly appeared in a new light.

Was this person Count Paul Demidoff, the man dreaded and hated by the Thurstons? Was he all that Grant Thurston had called him, perjurer, spy, murderer, villain?"

And Coral had said that Thurston was guilty, that he deserved more than a sentence to Siberia, death itself.

All these things rose in Mark Million's mind while he stood at the little table watching Colonel Redpath from the corners of his eyes.

"By Jove! a man who escapes from Siberia deserves a thousand years of freedom!" mentally averred Mark. "Guilty or not guilty, I stand between the sleuths and Grant Thurston. They are not going to tear him from the child whose life is wrapped up in his. I don't care if a score of Paul Demidoffs and Claude Coldgrips come for him. They can't have him!"

Fortune shifted her favors back and forth across the rough table. Now Colonel Redpath was the winner, now one or the other of his adversaries.

At last the fickle goddess seemed to desert the Russian altogether, and with a cheerful laugh which told that he was no growler, he pushed back his bench and got up.

"I went to bed awhile ago," he smiled, catching Mark's eye. "But I heard the boys enjoying themselves here, and the temptation to become one of them was too strong to be resisted. I like Silver Deck," he quickly added. "You seem to make it here on the quiet."

"We don't fight for the spoil, but we're rather dangerous for all," answered Mark with a twinkle in the depths of his eyes.

"Claws under the velvet, eh?" laughed the Russian.

The boss miner nodded.

"I like life that is not all unvarying peace."

"You'll find that kind an' enough o' it at Leadville, colonel!" called out a burly fellow at the bar. "At the lifting of a finger or the drop o' a hat down thar they go at it with a vengeance. The other day Laredo Luke, a cowboy bully, shot a Russian duke for drinkin' to the czar."

Mark Million saw Colonel Redpath start at the tough's words.

"What business has a Russian duke in Leadville?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Mebbe he wasn't much o' a duke, after all. Their triggers have no respect for titles at Leadville, an' we don't like 'em any too well hyer in Silver Deck. Was you ever tied to a title, colonel, besides yer military one?"

"Never!" answered the Russian, boldly, thus disowning the title of "count," which he was said to possess.

"Then walk up and drink with the American eagle!" responded the Silver Decker, and broad-shouldered, giant Demidoff came forward, still watched by Mark Million, at whose lips appeared a faint smile.

As the Russian threw his head back to give the liquor uninterrupted descent, something glistened beneath his collar.

Seen but for the fraction of a second, the flash had not failed to catch Mark's eye, and the next moment the boss of Silver Deck knew that he was not the only man who had seen it.

"When do you move on, colonel?" he asked the Russian.

"Oh, I hardly know—in a day or so, maybe. I want to look around a little—"

"We have no stocks on the market here."

"So I understand. But the lay of the land pleases me, and I like the boys."

"But we're dangerous, remember, Colonel Redpath—dangerous!" And Mark Million touched the broad brim of his hat to the Russian as he ended his warning with a light laugh, and turned toward the door.

Colonel Redpath's eyes followed him till he disappeared, and he said within himself:

"Dangerous, eh? So am I."

"Captain Mark," suddenly said a voice at the miner's elbow, as he was about to enter his cabin, "did you see the flash o' something under his collar when he drank?"

"I saw, Toby," answered Mark, through his teeth. "And I won't forget it when the time comes!"

CHAPTER VII.

TWO WELL-FILLED SADDLES.

A MAN with a dark face and in rough clothes that matched it well, was examining the walls and door of a small room much after the manner exhibited by a newly-caged tiger.

It was in Leadville, and the man was the marshal's latest catch, our old acquaintance, Bolivar Blink.

The "devil marshal" of Leadville, as the Silver Decker called that individual, seemed to take a delight in caging him after a few words from Captain Coldgrip, and Bolivar could only vow future vengeance and beat the walls of his cage while he knew the New York spotter would beat him to the mountain camp.

The Leadville station-house was not a very elegant affair. What its few rooms lacked in finish they made up in strength, and the tough from Silver Deck saw that the one he occupied was sufficient to hold him.

Meanwhile, Captain Coldgrip had gone back to Cyclone at the Wildcat, a place he quitted abruptly to intercept Bolivar's important flight.

Cyclone was awaiting him with a curiosity sharpened by the brief interview already had.

"I think Mr. Blink has changed his mind," remarked the detective. "At any rate, he won't go to Silver Deck to-night."

"He was going back, then?"

"It looked that way."

"Going back to his master, of course! That man has been at Mark Million's beck an' call ever since he came to the camp. The whole layout, for that matter, is under his thumb; but thar war one who preferred freedom to slavery."

"You mean Cyclone?" said Coldgrip, with a piercing look.

"I mean no one else," was the answer.

"Tell me something about Silver Deck," continued the detective. "Its citizens are all men, I hear."

"Oh, no; thar's one woman—Coral."

"Who is Coral?"

"Why, Coral!" laughed Cyclone. "She has seen a good deal of life in many strange places. That's pretty much all I can say about her."

"This man lies!" concluded the sleuth. "He doesn't intend to open the volume of Coral's life for my inspection. I'll try him again," and then he resumed:

"Coral lives with her father, of course?"

Cyclone gave a violent start and then burst into a laugh.

"Coral's father died long ago in—"

There he stopped and then finished in a different tone.

"In the East somewhar. That's why he couldn't be with her now at the Deck."

"Oh," smiled Coldgrip. "I thought Coral was young."

"About forty, cap'n."

"The only woman at Silver Deck when you left?"

"The sole specimen of the sex."

"You've heard from there since you came away?"

"Frequently."

"The female side of the house has not been increased?"

"Not that I know of."

"Cyclone is not deceiving me now," said the detective, to himself. "He doesn't know whether or not Silver Deck has a new beauty."

"If ye'r goin' up thar, you'll find out," suddenly continued Cyclone. "I don't think Coral'd let a woman stay thar if she didn't like her, an' Coral's a strange creature. I used to get along with her pretty well, an'," with a chuckle that made his black eyes twinkle, "I used to know her thoroughly, too. I wish you a pleasant and profitable trip if ye'r goin' up, an' I guess you ar'."

Captain Coldgrip delivered no direct reply. He saw that there was nothing else to be got out of the "witness," and five minutes later, having accepted a certain invitation from the proprietor of the Wildcat, he once more stood on the streets of Leadville.

"When did you meet that Atlantic ferret, Cyclone?" asked a man who entered the faro room shortly after the captain's departure.

"What ferret?" exclaimed Cyclone.

"Oh, I recollect that you weren't hyer when he was engaged in his famous Richard Redhilt campaign."

Cyclone changed color twice in a second.

"Rattlers an' lizards! you don't mean that he is Claude Coldgrip?" he cried.

"He's no one else."

"Wring me for a dish-rag! if I ain't blind," he ejaculated. "Captain Coldgrip, eh? On another trail, I'll bet my million!"

"He never comes to Colorado for fun. Thar's no Richard Redhilt now, no Injun Nick, but you can bet your head, Cap'n Cyclone, that some one else is to be hunted down. Yes, I'll take plain lightnin', Josephus," and Cyclone's informer turned to the bar, leaving a look of settled astonishment on the Silver Decker's face.

"Somebody to be hunted down? That is true if that man was Coldgrip," murmured Cyclone.

"Why all his cross-questioning about Coral? Why his eagerness to know whether thar warn't another woman at the 'Deck'? Why his sudden departure when he knew that Bolivar Blink had gone? Something in the Colorado atmosphere? Well, I should remark!"

In less than ten minutes later Cyclone walked into one of the best-appearing houses in Leadville. He went in without knocking, as if he was a familiar visitor there, and his heavy tread in the hall conveyed his approach to a man who occupied a room at the end of it.

As Cyclone opened the door the tenant of the room turned his head.

"Good-night, baron!" saluted Cyclone, coming forward. "You know what I said when I war hyar last?"

"Yes."

"Well, the Wildcat is yours!"

The listener let a smile of satisfaction slip over his face, which was handsome though somewhat florid.

Everybody knew Sancho Pedro, the "Baron of Leadville"—a man with an endless amount of money at his command, an old sport, miner, rough, gambler and what-not.

He had one ambition, and that was to get everybody else's money. He already owned, though very few people knew it, more than one-half of the gambling dens of the mountain, and the wealth that flowed into his coffers from various secret investments, was something marvelous.

No wonder his eyes sparkled when Cyclone announced that the Wildcat was his. He had been a nabob's vineyard to him for some time, and he had made Cyclone some magnificent offers for it, for it was the best paying institution of the sort in Leadville.

Now, when he least expected the prize, it was about to drop into his lap, and Sancho Pedro was to add another fleeing establishment to those he already controlled.

He did not ask what had happened; he did not care to know. The Wildcat was to be his, that was knowledge enough.

"At the old price of course, Cyclone?" he asked.

"At the old price," was the echo.

The baron turned quietly and wheeled his chair toward a large iron safe imbedded in the wall.

Before he spoke again, he opened the door, reached in and took a package marked on the back with five figures.

Cyclone leaned a little to one side so that he could get a glimpse at the interior of the safe, but he didn't see much.

"Don't I know that that package has been lyin' thar for me?" demanded Cyclone. "He knew I would come some time, and the only event that could have brought me to him has happened. Wal, hyer we ar'!" and Sancho Pedro shut the safe and turned to his visitor.

"It is there—the old price," he remarked tossing the money to Cyclone, who caught it, and then he glanced at his watch and went on:

"All earnings from this hour are mine. It is twenty minutes till nine," and the watch shut with a snap which seemed to close the bargain and sale.

"Do you go away, Cyclone?" suddenly asked the baron.

"Yes."

"Well, good luck go with you."

Sancho Pedro held out his hand, which cyclone took as he left the chair, and shook while he looked into the millionaire's face.

"Cooler than ten Satans!" cried the late proprietor of the Wildcat, when the door of the baron's residence closed behind him. "Lif' a whirlpool, he draws everything to him sometime or other. I've said I'd never let him catch me, but I have. Well, if that king o' the sleuths had kept out o' town, I wouldn't be carryin' the Wildcat in my bosom to-night!"

Back to the faro ranch went Cyclone. He walked into the little private office and took from a locked desk two revolvers that showed the marks of usage.

Slipping these into convenient places in his belt he wore, he next took from the same desk a small flat packet which he transferred to another pocket.

The room without the private apartment was well filled with the Wildcat's devotees, and a smile stole over Cyclone's face as he took in the scene.

"It's all Sancho's now, an' they don't know it!" he laughed, and then without a word good-by to any one he walked away, leaving fortune to dispense her smiles wherever she pleased.

"I wonder if the captain is off yet!" he asked himself. "He'll have to be careful or somebody will beat him to Silver Deck. I guess he put a stop to Bolivar's going. I don't want anything to bother me when I'm likely to take a hand in a big game, and that's why I tossed the Wildcat into Sancho Pedro's lap."

Very few people saw the horse which a little after nine o'clock carried a man through the dusty thoroughfares of Leadville.

Down the mountain-road which the stars shadowed with bewitching light, rode a person

whose face was turned eastward against the brisk wind which moved the long locks that touched shoulders broad and strong like a giant's.

It was Captain Cyclone, seated like a king rancher in the deep saddle, with no interests to bind him longer to the city among the mountains, and with all his worldly possessions in his pockets.

There was a strangely eager look in his eyes, a desire to get to a certain place as soon as possible, and when the horse struck the stage-trail hundreds of feet below Leadville, he felt the keen spurs that glistened at the sport's heels.

Away he went, carried through the starlight on a meteor, as it were.

Leadville's lights became distant stars and then faded away altogether.

"If I can beat him thar and see Coral first; that's all I want!" cried Cyclone, and then he spoke no more.

Ahead of him, a long way ahead and as well mounted, rode another man whose very look told that he, too, was pushing forward on no unimportant mission.

The wind lifted his hat rim before it touched Cyclone's face, but he did not laugh at the prospect of beating anybody to Silver Deck.

He went on, as silently, like a hunter dumb.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RUSSIAN SHOWS HIS TEETH.

One day a murmur of surprise went the rounds in Silver Deck when it was known that Cyclone had come back!

There were those in camp who remembered having heard him say, a few months before, that he had shaken the dust of the camp from his feet forever, and no one thought, from his manner of expression, that he would ever return.

But here he was.

Speculation was started by his return. Some said that the Wildcat had failed to pan out to Cyclone's satisfaction, others thought he had sold out at good figures, and had come back to settle his friends he had made in former years; and a little circle headed by Mark Million whispered that the tough's return at that moment meant mischief of some kind.

Cyclone was soon the most astonished man in Silver Deck.

By good use of his eyes and a few judicious inquiries, he was satisfied that Captain Coldgrip had not reached the camp. What had become of the New York sleuth? Had he tarried in Leadville to discover something definite about certain supposed citizens of Silver Deck, and had he (Cyclone) by his quick disposition of the Wildcat to Sancho Pedro, beaten him over the mountain trail?

Cyclone was not received with any demonstrations of delight; but the welcome was not such as to render him suspicious.

Mark Million seemed pleased to see him, and in the numerous questions he asked, there was not one to indicate that the return was thought to be of a deep-laid purpose.

Cyclone wanted to see Coral, but to go straight to her would not do.

There was dropping toward the west when he entered Silver Deck, and much of his time before then and dusk he spent in the little settlement where the mountain miners had their thirst and exchanged dust over stained boards of the card tables.

While a man had opened Coral's door, and a young straight into her eye had said in significant tones.

"Cyclone has come back. Remember!"

The speaker was Mark himself, and before the exclamation of surprise which the announcement drew from the woman's lips had subsided, he was gone.

"I thought of sending for him and here he is!" ejaculated Coral. "I wonder if he knows who he is? How could he find it out in Leadville? Fate has brought Cyclone back. Fate! it is it."

She must have thought that Cyclone's visit to Silver Deck would be followed by a call on her after Mark's call she stationed herself at the window and watched. She saw the slopes of the mountains grow dark and at last their wooded tops were no longer outlined against the sky.

At last the sound of a heavy footfall struck her, and she stepped back and waited with her hand on the door.

When it opened, as it presently did, she saw the tall figure of the man who had come back, Cyclone.

Coral sprang forward with a cry of joy, but then, as if she recalled Mark's "remember," she stopped and shrunk away.

"War a long while gettin' hyer Coral!" laughed Cyclone as he thrust forward one of his broad hands and caught hers.

"They seem to be watchin' me, Cap'n Mark and the pards; but I stood it as long as I could, and hyer I am."

Coral threw a swift glance toward the door.

"What has happened hyer since I went away?" continued the mountain sport. "Don't tell me that all's been serene like old times, for I

know that something has occurred. I kin read that much on the men's faces. What! ain't you going to talk, Coral?"

"I dare not," was the response.

"Not to me?" demanded Cyclone, shutting his teeth hard. "Look hyer, woman! you haven't forgotten the relations—"

"I never forget anything!" broke in Coral. "I wanted to see you, I was going to send you word, but now I can't tell you anything."

"What devil-puzzle is this?" ejaculated Cyclone. "Has it anything to do with the man who tackled me in Leadville?"

"What man?"

"The great sleuth of America, the fellow who crushed Injun Nick—"

"Claude Coldgrip?" in startling accents.

"That's the man."

"And you saw him in Leadville?"

"Yes."

"Then he knows the game is here."

"What game?"

Coral's face grew colorless.

"I tell you I can't talk," she cried. "I've told you too much already. Go away. Let me alone, Cyclone. If Captain Coldgrip is coming you don't want to play against him," and she added in a lower voice: "Neither do I."

Cyclone drew off and looked at the woman before him.

Was this the person who was to tell him so much when he reached Silver Deck?

Coral seemed to read his inmost thoughts.

"You don't know whose hand has appeared again in the one great drama of our lives!" she suddenly cried, springing at him and clutching his arm.

"Ah!" exclaimed Cyclone. "It is the Scorpion!"

The words broke the woman's grip, she fell back and looked at him while her bosom rose and fell with excitement.

"What is he?"

"Go and find him!" and her hand suddenly covered the door.

"You mean you can't tell me, eh?"

"I can't."

"Some o' Mark Million's work," grated Cyclone. "He's got you completely under his thumb, Coral. If you would you could post me in another direction. If Paul Demidoff is here it is because others have reached this part of the world."

Coral made no reply.

"Well, I'll find out without your assistance," the sport went on.

"I guess I'm equal to this occasion. I used to be to others just as great. By the way, Captain Coldgrip asked after you."

"What did he want to know?"

"He asked if you were the only woman at Silver Deck, and the only one who has been hyer this summer."

"And you told him—"

"That I guess you were the only one."

A smile wreathed Coral's mouth.

"He didn't more than half believe me," laughed Cyclone. "And I guess he knew what he was talkin' about."

The last sentence was couched in a lower tone, and the speaker drew back to the door while the woman looked at him. As he was about to supplement his words with "good night" the door was struck lightly from the outside.

Cyclone stepped back and watched Coral go forward.

She opened the door, and her look was a stare.

"Couldn't you have stayed away?" she exclaimed as she recoiled to the little table where the lamp burned. "I know you, and you must expect to be found out here."

"Let them find me out!" retorted the man who came in with his eyes riveted upon the woman. "But, who's to unmask me here?—you, woman? They call you Coral in America, I believe?"

The woman could not keep from sending a glance toward Cyclone whose eyes were fastened on the stalwart visitor.

"Why, hello! count!" he suddenly cried.

Coral's caller turned with a start.

"Still on the old trail, eh?" continued Cyclone with a laugh. "Don't you know me?" and he caught up the lamp and held it before his face as he stood grinning at the astonished countenance of Colonel Redpath, alias Paul Demidoff, the Russian sleuth.

The scene would have appeared ludicrous to Coral if certain fears had not held possession of her.

"I know you now!" confessed Colonel Redpath. "You were not here when I came?"

"Perhaps not."

"Yes, I am still after the guilty. Did you think that, when I heard he had escaped from the mines, I would let him go?"

"I knew your nature wasn't much seasoned with mercy," was Cyclone's assurance.

"Mercy? It never knocked at our door for it knew the latch would never rise for it. I did not expect to find you here. I came to see this woman," and the Russian turned to Coral who was regarding him with a strange look.

"I can't tell you anything!" she exclaimed.

"What you want to know you must find out

for yourself, only I can say that they are not here."

"Who are not?" asked Colonel Redpath.

"You know!"

"Do you permit her to deceive me?" cried the Russian sleuth-hound, wheeling upon Cyclone while his finger covered Coral.

"I don't control her any more," was the reply.

"You used to."

"But she is free."

"You mean that the old bonds between you two have been dissolved?"

"That's it, count."

"Then you have no right to interfere with me."

A flash of indignation appeared in Cyclone's eyes. He seemed to measure the figure of the Russian from head to foot.

Colonel Redpath went back to the silent Coral.

"You can't afford to mislead me, woman," he went on. "You know why I am here. My coming to this wild region is no secret to the woman who, in the courts of St. Petersburg, helped me to success."

Coral seemed transformed by these words. She tried to speak, but the words got no further than her lips; there they died.

"You don't want to be too hard on her hyer," warned the rough voice of Cyclone.

"She is nothing to you now. By your own admission, this woman is no longer your wife," was the retort, accompanied by a fierce glance. "She must tell me what she knows, and she knows enough to end right here the long hunt of the Muscovite sleuth!"

Cyclone looked at Coral; there was a look of mute appeal in her eyes as their gaze met.

"What do you want to know?" he demanded, turning to the Russian.

"What became of Grant Thurston and his daughter when they got here?" he exclaimed.

"Did they come to Silver Deck?"

"They did."

"When?"

"About four months ago."

"Does he call himself Grant Thurston now?"

"Yes."

"What is the girl's new name?"

"Medora."

Cyclone's immediate response was silence.

"Did you track them to Silver Deck?" he asked.

"I did."

"And lost the trail hyer?"

"In this mountain camp. They have been here within the last two days. Haven't they, woman?"

Coral did not speak.

"You want me to lose!" roared Colonel Redpath, striding toward the woman. "I don't care if this is America. By the eternal gods! I can drag you before the bar of vengeance, and, thousands of miles from Russia, I can inflict a punishment worse than the strings of Kratopkin's knout!"

The woman recoiled with a wild cry of horror.

"The very threat seems to crush her. Don't you see?" laughed Colonel Redpath, with a glance at Cyclone.

"You want to let up on Coral!" was the quick answer. "If the exiles were here within two days, you ought to find out where they are."

"But she knows."

"Well, she does not have to tell," returned Cyclone, with stern decision as he stepped quietly between Coral and the Russian. "Thar's going to be another party in this game before long. He's somewhar on the road now."

"Who is he?"

"The man you played fast and loose with in New York, Claude Coldgrip."

Colonel Redpath started, but forced a smile upon his face.

"With my American sleuth to help me, the game is mine!" he cried.

CHAPTER IX.

MARK MILLION'S PLAY.

Two eyes, very dark and very keen, were upon Colonel Redpath when he left Coral's cabin.

The Russian sleuth was not feeling at his best.

"Does she attempt to balk me?" he exclaimed.

"Of course I did not expect to find this woman here, but now that she is found, once more, I shall use her as I may see fit, despite her stubbornness. And Cyclone—as he is now called—I will match him, too, if he shows his teeth."

The eyes that watched the Russian belonged to a man who might be harder than Cyclone to match.

Mark Million saw him from the moment he left Coral's abode until he passed beyond the door of the nightly resort of the men of Silver Deck.

Then he waited awhile longer, until Cyclone came out and disappeared. The next moment he was at the door himself.

Coral uttered a slight cry at sight of the stern boss of Silver Deck, a cry which told that he was the last man she wanted to see.

"Both here at once, eh?" grinned Mark, com-

ing forward, while Coral, still showing the effect of the Russian's words, stared speechlessly at him. "Was it a mere accident, my good woman, or, a bit of nice play by the sweet-scented pair?"

"It was accident," declared Coral.

"You are certain of this?"

"Before Heaven, I am, Captain Mark!"

"Cyclone would come back. He left Leadville kinder sudden, I presume."

"He did not say."

"You need not tell me what brought him back. I have made a discovery."

Mark thrust a hand into one of his pantaloons pockets and Coral seemed to wait breathlessly for its reappearance.

"When a man moves he ought to take all his important traps along," he continued, drawing forth an old letter which Coral seemed to recognize on sight, for her eyes dilated. "You will remember that I took possession of Cyclone's shanty after the two exiles came. Well, between the logs I found bits of paper, and now and then some fragments of writing. These I gathered up to examine at some future time. Among 'em I found this. You seem to know it, judgin' from the expression in your eyes. You wrote it, in St. Petersburg, to Count Paul Demidoff, and sent it to him by your husband. It is dated July 10, 1872."

Coral held out her hand, but Mark with a shake of his head and a smile, drew his own back.

"In this letter," he went on, with a cruelty that cut the tortured woman like a two-edged knife; "in it you say that you will testify to anything in consideration of the suspension of a certain sentence, and the sum of one thousand roubles—"

Coral broke in upon Mark's sentence with a startling cry.

"My God! is *that* in that letter?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, and more. A little further down the page you promise to quit Russia and to remain away forever. For the suspension of sentence and the thousand roubles, Coral?"

The one woman of Silver Deck was a statue before the boss mountaineer.

"I guess you don't want to hear all the letter," he continued.

"You need not read it."

"I thought so. I don't know how this letter ever remained in Cyclone's hands. Perhaps it was never delivered. But you testified, Coral; you went on the witness-stand of the secret tribunal managed by Paul Demidoff, and you swore to the most infamous story that ever left a human tongue. For the thousand roubles, was it?"

Coral seemed to be writhing in the grasp of some unseen demon.

"Spare me!" she suddenly cried, starting forward.

"I ought to!" sneered Captain Mark. "I ought to spare the woman who would not spare when mercy waited at her gate. But, look here, Coral. The man who left first to-night is the Scorpion of the Palace—the same Paul Demidoff who suspended the sentence and gave the thousand roubles—"

"He kept back the pay, the reptile!" cried Coral with flashing eyes.

"But the sentence?"

The woman recoiled to the logs of the cabin, as if the hand of the sport had been put forward to touch her.

"He said he would suspend it, but he lied again!" she went on.

"What was that sentence?"

"Not for a thousand pounds of dust!" she cried, starting.

"Well, keep your secret, Coral," smiled Mark. "I won't try to force that from you. To-night, just now, he wanted to know what had become of the exiles?"

"Yes."

"And you told him?"

"That they were not here."

"Which he did not want to believe?"

"He has discovered that they were here."

"Through some traitor?"

"I don't know."

"Doesn't he trust you?"

"He did not want to when here."

"Did he threaten?"

"Yes, but Cyclone told him through his teeth to slacken his pace."

"And he told Cyclone what?"

"He said that he no longer was my husband."

"Which is not true?"

"Which is true, made so by the courts of this country since we left Russia."

"Coral, there is to begin a drama here which you might not wish to play in," said Mark, as he leaned toward the woman watching him like a falcon. "You don't want a mountain court, like the kind we sometimes organize in Colorado to pass on your actions across the sea."

"Merciful heavens, no!" gasped the woman, as she in a second drew a mental picture of the grouped pards of Silver Deck.

"Then you must get away."

"When?"

"Now! I am going to open my batteries on this Russian bloodhound. The exiles are not to

fall back into the clutches of the wretch who sent one to torture a thousand feet under ground, and the other, a child, to a strange land. I am going to make war on all who help the sleuth, including the New York spotter, Coldgrip, who is said to be linked to him in this hunt for innocent blood. Cyclone will be Paul Demidoff's pard inside of three hours."

"After the count's infamy toward me?" cried Coral.

"Yes. Colonel Redpath, as he is called here, knows how to draw men like Cyclone to him. Before the fight opens you must go. Get ready, Coral."

Mark Million leaned against the door, and, with folded arms, watched Coral, who emerged slowly from the bewilderment caused by his visit.

"Can't I see Cyclone before I go?" she asked, in a pleading voice.

"No."

"You are cruel."

"I have to be in a case of this kind."

Coral turned away and gathered up a few articles, the larger number from a stout little chest in one corner of the cabin.

"I am ready now," she exclaimed, wheeling suddenly upon the man at the door. "It doesn't take me long to pack up. I came here poor and I leave as poverty's daughter."

She cast over her shoulder a look of pain as she reached the door with the fingers of the Colorado sport softly encircling her arm.

She must have thought that she was quitting a place where she had at times been happy, and that she was going into exile with a hidden future to swallow her up.

Mark Million led her through a part of Silver Deck to a low shed at one side.

"Aha! I am not going to be forced to walk?"

"No, Coral. I give you one of the best horses in Colorado."

The woman stood aloof while the mountaineer entered the shed and led forth two horses.

"Is he going too?" Coral asked herself.

The next minute the hands of Mark assisted her to the back of one of the steeds, while he mounted the other.

"You need not go along, Captain Mark," she remarked, with a smile, which broadened as she added: "I'm not afraid to join alone the mighty army of exiles."

"You shan't have me with you long, Coral," was the answer. "I only want to show you the road."

A minute later the two horses were moving away side by side, and continued thus until Silver Deck, full of strange fate, was a mile behind them.

"You can go now," said Mark, drawing rein. "Yonder runs the trail, which a horse like the one you have cannot miss on the blackest night. Follow it, and it will lead you to other scenes. Don't humor the temptation to come back here. Keep away from Cyclone, Paul Demidoff, and Captain Coldgrip. If you come back, woman,"

and Mark's voice got at this juncture an additional sternness, "if you come back, remember that I have a letter which in these mountains would lynch an angel of light!"

Coral, as she listened, grasped Mark Million's wrist.

"You need not look for me!" she cried. "What should tempt me back to the Russian scorpion? Why should I want to breathe the same air with the New York spotter? Why tarry where a man keeps for years a letter like the one you found? No! no! You'll have to hunt me if you want me, Captain Million. Good-by! I wish you luck in the game, but let me say ere I go—the exiles are not worth your devotion."

She drew back, her fine figure rose proudly above the saddle and the next moment Mark saw her not, but heard the rapid gallop of an unseen horse!

"Farewell, Coral!" he laughed. "This is an easy riddance—easier than I expected. I guess I've deprived the Russian sleuth of one pretty fair card. I doubt if I ever see Coral again."

It was all guesswork with Mark Million, for he was destined to see once more, before death claimed him, the woman he had just driven into exile.

The boss of Silver Deck turned and rode back.

"Medora will rest easy when I tell her that the fair perjurer is gone!" he thought when, having put his horse away he walked through the camp.

"Cap'n, for a thousand, I've found you at last!" cried a voice as a man sprung into his path. "I fell into the clutches of the Atlantic spotter, but here I am. Not even the jail of Leadville could hold Bolivar Blink from his master. He is at the door. Now look out for Captain Coldgrip!"

Mark Million looked into the man's excited eyes and smiled.

"I'm ready for anybody, Bolivar," he exclaimed. "You can tell me about it over the counter," and he led his Leadville watch into the saloon then a dozen steps away.

"Jupiter jingo!" cried Bolivar, clutching Mark's arm as he touched the counter. "Look

at the man who fronts Waco Dick! That is he! That is the Satan with the cold hand."

Million turned slowly and saw the person designated.

"Right you are, Bolivar," he said in a whisper. "I'd know him among a thousand. He can hold no big hands in Silver Deck!"

CHAPTER X.

FACE TO FACE.

CAPTAIN COLDGRIP knew when he set out from Leadville, that he was soon to meet a man with whom, on a hunt which has nothing to do with the present romance, he had once had an encounter.

Mark Million had been concerned in an affair which had called to the fore some of the great sleuth's keenest talents; but in the general catch at the close of the game, the now boss of Silver Deck had slipped through the net and escaped. As his capture was not demanded, Captain Coldgrip had let him go, although he knew that the man was almost anybody's match in coolness, cunning, and bravery.

Mark was now the head man of Silver Deck; he had around him a lot of men who were ready to obey his harshest orders and his slightest nod.

The New York spotter would find the camp against him; he could expect nothing else. The pasting of Bolivar Blink in Leadville, told that Mark Million was on the lookout for him, and that, from the moment of his reaching Silver Deck, he must expect to fight the crowd.

He did not know that the man he had left in Leadville jail had effected his liberty; but Bolivar had decided too late to beat the sleuth to camp. When he came opposite the saloon he was startled to see the figure of the spotter, and then he began an eager hunt for Mark.

The men in the camp now seemed to realize that the handsome man who came in with sparkling eye and a springy step was no ordinary person, and that he had come for a certain purpose.

Claude Coldgrip looked the crowd over at a glance.

"I left Cyclone very eager in Leadville," he said to himself. "I wonder if the old fellow took it into his head to come on? I was off the main trail long enough to let him pass, if he started soon on a good horse! but I don't see him here."

Cyclone was not in the place just then.

Not far away he and Colonel Redpath sat face to face in the tough's old cabin.

The eyes of the Russian were watching Cyclone's countenance, for he had just spoken a sentence which had thrown the sport into deep study.

"I had something here!" suddenly cried Cyclone, springing up. "Among my papers there was a letter which I think would fetch Coral to terms."

"Let me see it," replied Redpath.

Cyclone began to search the crevices between the logs of the cabin, and his movements were followed by the man in the chair.

"Do you make places like those your chest?" asked the Russian with a smile.

"Yes; they're good enough out here," laughed Cyclone, over his shoulder. "In Russia we'd need steel safes for our papers, eh Count?"

"And wouldn't think them safe then?"

"Hades and horns! it isn't here!" suddenly grated Cyclone. "I left it between those logs with a lot o' paper."

"Why didn't you take it with you?"

"I never expected to have use for it, you see. It was the letter she wrote you, saying that she'd swear to anything for certain favors. You gave me the letter after the trial, you know."

"I have not forgotten the circumstance. I'd like to have it now, for with it I could force her to reveal the hiding-place of the exiles."

"Well, I'm sorry, count."

"Perhaps she found it."

"Coral?" cried Cyclone. "Why, she never knew I had it!"

"Well, we'll have to try another scheme. You did not see him when he came?"

"I was in Leadville then."

"So you were. I wonder how the girl looked."

"She was beautiful when they sent the father to the north."

"Very beautiful!" acknowledged the Russian. Confound it all, Cyclone—I'm already used to your new name you see—we've got to fight this camp unless we can buy a part of it."

Cyclone leaned back and stared at the foreign sleuth.

"I don't think they'll sell," he replied.

"Don't they like dust?"

"They do."

"They have to work hard for what they get."

"And they sometimes throw it away, too."

The Russian was silent for a second.

"Call them all up before you, Cyclone!" he suddenly exclaimed, leaning toward the Silver Decker. "Go over them one by one. You know them all. Ain't there one Judas in the lot!—just one?"

"Not one traitor, count," was the reply.

"By heavens, we'll make one then," hissed Colonel Redpath.

A smile came to Cyclone's lips. "It may be a dangerous experiment. They wouldn't give me any satisfaction, and since I came back, I've put some of the slickest of questions to them, but all for nothing."

"I think I know who to begin on," answered the Russian.

"Well?"

"I'd try the little fellow who wears his hat to one side, revealing the end of a scar on his temple."

"Ho! Natty Nick!" ejaculated Cyclone, with a laugh.

"What about him?" asked Redpath eagerly.

"Well, you're a good judge of men, count. If there is any man in Silver Deck that I had to pick out for a traitor, it would be Natty Nick. He's been cursing fortune for a year."

Colonel Redpath said nothing, and it was evident that he had made up his mind.

"Now, if Captain Coldgrip comes, will he assist you?" asked Cyclone.

"He ought to."

"But will he? You know you once played fast and loose with him."

"Yes," said the Russian half under his breath.

"He told me, though, that he would help to run the exiles down."

"Does he know anything against you?"

"What do you mean, Cyclone?" and Colonel Redpath's look suddenly became a breathless stare.

"Oh, I just inquired!" smiled the late proprietor of the Wildcat in an off-hand way. "You know, count, that we're no seraphs, now by a long bow. This man Coldgrip, from what I have heard of him, can follow two trails at once, and when you think yourself safe, his cold hand is ready to swoop down upon you like an eagle. You saw him last in New York?"

"In his Broadway office."

"When?"

"A year ago."

"You then put him on the exiles' trail?"

"Yes."

"Hasn't he never sent in a report?"

"I have not asked for any."

"If he comes he will probably report to you. But I wish to Heaven he would stay away."

"Why, Cyclone?"

"I don't like a man like him!" ejaculated the tough. "He's got an eye like an eagle, and his voice can pierce your vitals like a knife. Confound your professional man-hunters, anyway! If he comes, get rid of him, throw him off. If you and I can't find the exiles without Captain Coldgrip, I'll retire in disgust. The camp holds the secret of their hiding-place. Silence is the word here. I can read it on the face of every man. Mark Million must have got wind of your coming. Grant Thurston and his child were in high feather here a week ago; but where are they now?"

"Where Paul Demidoff will find them!" cried the Russian. "I haven't tracked an enemy across Europe, and into the heart of the American continent to be baffled by a lot of mountain hares! I never give up a trail till I find success at the end. If he could escape from Siberia with a number branded on his shoulder, I can find him in this country!"

Count Demidoff got up and walked back and forth in the little cabin with the mien of an angry lion.

"I wouldn't want that man to hunt me," murmured Cyclone, as he covertly watched him. "I don't believe that he will find Captain Coldgrip so much in his employ as he thinks when they come together. Something happened in New York less than a year ago. I heard all about it from a man whom I met in Denver shortly after the event. He said that a big foreigner had something to do with it; I believe he said the man was supposed to be a Russian. But what makes me think of this now? I have got to help the count for the second time in my life. I don't know how it will pan out."

It was a few minutes later when the two men separated, and the stalwart figure of Colonel Redpath glided toward Coral's cabin.

A knock brought him no response, and then he opened the door and walked inside. The interior of the place was dark, and the very silence breathed of desertion.

After awhile the Russian struck a match, and found that no living being was near him.

"Maybe my threat frightened Coral away!" he ejaculated, with a grin. "I didn't intend it should bring about such a result. I can use the woman by and by. I used her to advantage once before this, and now that I have Cyclone for my ally, I can keep a grip on her."

But Coral did not respond, and while the match burned between thumb and finger, the fair exile of Silver Deck was riding away on the horse furnished by Captain Mark.

At length the Russian threw the match down in disgust and went out.

"To-morrow we'll know more!" he continued to himself. "Then, I think, I'll take a step that will give me the prey. I've bought men before this who wear their hats on one side, and, if I'm not mistaken, I'll find in Natty Nick a fellow whose fingers itch for the roubles I've exchanged for American gold."

The Russian neared Silver Deck's gaming establishment, and when abreast of the door the portal was opened and a man came out.

"Great Caesar! the Yankee sleuth in person!" Count Paul exclaimed.

The door shut behind Coldgrip, and two steps carried him to the figure of the Russian.

"He'll find me anyhow. Why need I avoid him now?" was Redpath's conclusion, so he put out his hand in a quick movement, and stood face to face with the cold-handed sleuth.

"By Jupiter! this is better than finding a bonanza!" the Russian cried. "Did you expect to find me here, captain?"

"I always expect to find people. I am never surprised," was the answer, and the faint light prevented Colonel Redpath from seeing the sparkle of the American's eyes.

They walked away together, past the silent and dark cabins of Silver Deck. When they paused the camp was behind them.

"What do you know?" asked Captain Coldgrip.

"They came here," was the answer. "They were here a few hours ago. Their hiding-place at this time is Silver Deck's secret. But we will hunt it down, won't we, captain?"

"I came here to find out," was the reply.

CHAPTER XI.

THE JUDAS OF SILVER DECK.

WHEN the two men, sleuths both, came back from the borders of the mountain camp, they parted for the night.

"Found at last," mused Captain Coldgrip, as he threw a last look at the stalwart figure moving from him. "I guess I haven't pursued this trail for nothing. I don't often pursue a double lead, but this time I am at just such a case. I begin to see—"

A figure rose in the path before him, and the next moment the New York spotter caught the glimmer of a revolver's barrel.

"You beat me in Leadville," cried a voice. "You tossed me into the clutches of its devil-marshal; but I'm on my own ground, now, Cap'n Coldgrip, an' I'm goin' to get even!"

The detective's answer was a leap forward, straight at the speaker, and his right hand caught the wrist above the revolver, and held it in a grip like that of a vise of steel.

"You, Bolivar Blink, is it?" laughed the sleuth. "You did get to Silver Deck, I see."

"All the powers couldn't keep me back!" was the answer. "Don't you know that you dare not touch me hyer?"

"I've got you in my grip now, Bolivar. You don't want to show your teeth. There, sir! you are free! Sneak off like a whipped wolf, or I'll drag you among the boys and exhibit the man who has inspected the interior of Leadville's jail."

The cold hand no longer held Bolivar. He stood free before the man whose eyes were piercing him, and the revolver which he had thrust into the detective's face, hung at his side.

Coldgrip walked away.

"Jehu! I don't want to fool with that man!" gasped Bolivar. "Quick as a cat and strong as a lion! He'd just as soon make me the laughing-stock of the camp as not, and I don't want to be held up as the first Silver Decker who fell into the hands of the Leadville marshal. I guess I don't want to play with the Coldgrip fire." And Bolivar put up his six-shooter and vanished.

The American detective had already passed out of sight, therefore he did not see the man who came from the saloon and disappeared beyond a certain cabin door on the outskirts of Silver Deck.

A young man he was, the youngest citizen of the camp, and the dandy-like manner in which he wore his hat told that he was Natty Nick.

"Broke! always to bed broke!" he exclaimed, throwing his hat against the wall, out of humor.

"Why can't I get a smile from fortune once in a while? what keeps me here? Here! when there are Denver, Leadville, 'Frisco! Can't I never get a hand worth a copper? If I stay here awhile longer, I won't have a bed to sleep on!"

The man was mad and disgusted.

He threw off his coat and tossed it after his hat, then drew his boots and kicked them into one corner!

"I might have a servant to keep me at this time if I hadn't stuck to this poverty ranch so long!" he resumed. "It's dig, dig, dig for the little you get, and these hands ar' out of their sphere when they hunt for nuggets a hundred feet below daylight."

At that moment Natty Nick turned and listened with his face toward the door.

"Come in," he said, the next moment; and then his eyes grew large with astonishment, for he saw the giant figure of Colonel Redpath.

It was evident from the young miner's stare that the Russian was the last man he expected to see under his shanty roof; but, quickly recovering to some extent, he invited the colonel in—an invitation which was, of course, accepted.

Natty Nick searched the face of his visitor with a look full of caution.

He knew how Mark Million regarded this man, that nobody was to mention within his hearing anything about the exiles, Grant Thurston and his child.

"You've come to the wrong place for information, if that's what you want," mentally vowed Natty Nick. "I'm willing to draw you out, but if you get too inquisitive, why, I'll drop you like I would a hot bar."

The Russian took the roughly-fashioned seat near the miner's table, and spread his net.

"Just going to turn in, eh?" he asked.

"Had a notion to."

"You've probably swamped the boys at the tables."

Nick could not keep back a growl for his miserable luck.

"Me swamp anybody?" he laughed, dolefully. "Why, the goddess wouldn't look at me—not through a smoked glass even!"

"Pshaw! you don't woo her persistently."

"Don't I? I work under the daylight all day, and throw my dust at her feet at night. If that's not 'persistent wooing,' colonel, I wish you'd define the term."

"Maybe a change of tables, a new deck, and other opponents would fetch her to terms," said the Russian, in a suggestive voice.

Natty Nick burst into a laugh.

"Talk to Lazarus about opening a bank!" he exclaimed. "Why, I couldn't at this moment buy a second-hand deck to open business with!"

"So bad as that, my man?"

"It was never better!"

"The very fellow I want, and in the right humor, too," thought the Russian. "He advertised himself by the way he wore his hat."

Then Colonel Redpath, alias Count Demidoff, leaned toward Natty Nick with a faint semblance of victory in his deep-set orbs.

"You wouldn't let me help you, I presume?" he said.

"Maybe you wouldn't want to," smiled Nick.

"There's no need of your being poverty's darling in Silver Deck," continued Redpath. "You might become a nabob in 'Frisco, for I've noticed that you play well."

"With infamous 'hands,' was the response.

"With money to wait for good 'hands,' you would soon be on top."

"That might be, colonel; but when I don't own any bonanzas, I have no right to think of nabobism, here or elsewhere."

"You don't want to leave Silver Deck, I see."

"I'm not glued to the place," ejaculated Natty Nick. "I own nothing, therefore, I've got nothing to sell."

Nothing to sell!

The Russian started, he could not help it, at the young miner's last words.

Natty Nick was the possessor of a very important secret, and the stalwart Muscovite had come to buy it.

"Let us come down to business, to hard-pan, as you call it in the mines," he commenced again, lowering his voice just a little. "I wish a favor which you are able to grant me, Natty Nick, and I am willing to pay for it."

The miner's eyes got a sparkle. He thought he had adroitly led the Russian up to the business of his errand. Now he would see what Colonel Redpath wanted, but he thought he could guess.

"I am anxious to find some people who left the East some time ago," continued the foreigner. "They came to Silver Deck on the stage from Denver, a man and a young woman, father and daughter; Thurston by name."

Natty Nick said nothing.

"For information which will lead to their discovery I am willing to pay liberally. Money is nothing to me, Natty Nick; and I'd sooner line your pockets than those of any other man in Silver Deck. I never beat about the bush when I can put my hand in and catch the bird. What is the information worth?"

The question was blunt enough, but Natty Nick affected not to understand.

"Information, is it?" he exclaimed. "You want to find two people—"

"Grant Thurston and Medora!" interrupted the Russian. "Is the information worth a thousand, Natty Nick?"

The young miner left his stool with a flushed face, and stepped back.

"You've struck the wrong man, Colonel Redpath!" he cried, as the Russian looked up and confronted him with the confidence of a general who knows what he has in reserve. "You may have ten thousand at your command but you bring it to the wrong market! What I know I don't sell for money!"

"That's all put on," inwardly exclaimed Paul Demidoff.

"Very well," he said aloud as he looked at Nick. "There's a dozen others who have the same goods to sell."

"Not in this camp, sir!"

"I did not think you wanted to remain in poverty here when, with a stake which can be won in five minutes, you may roll in wealth in any city in America. Now, sir, I know humanity too well to see that you don't want a raise." And the Russian left his chair and crossed the space that intervened between him and Natty Nick.

"I think I am a fool if I let this opportunity slip," passed like a flash through Nick's mind. "What's the stranger and the girl to me, anyhow? If this man pays me well, why not sell

the secret, and get the stake somebody else will, if I don't?"

Did Colonel Redpath read the operations of the miner's mind at that moment? He seemed to, for he waited several minutes before he spoke again.

"Five thousand would lay the foundation for a million in hands like yours," he suddenly resumed. "You don't have to remain here. Trails lead from Silver Deck to the big cities, and to the flush camps. Nobody's going to look after Natty Nick, either. It is a fair business bargain. I give you a certain sum for a certain bit of information. The same kind of business has been transacted before our day a thousand times over. Five thousand for a sentence! What is easier, Natty Nick?"

"That's not much in 'Frisco," ventured the miner.

The semblance of a coming laugh lit up the foreign tracker's eyes.

Then he leaned suddenly toward Natty Nick; his dark fingers found his wrist and circled it like the folds of an anaconda.

"Say six thousand, clear in hard cash in hand," he whispered. "Six thousand for the information. Come! back to your stool, Captain Nick. It is a long while before day, and you may want to be well on the road to the new field of wealth before the morning breaks."

"My venture made me a clean thousand!" mentally ejaculated Natty Nick, as he went back to his seat.

"Now, sir, go on," continued the Russian.

"I'd like to see something first," was the reply.

Without a word Colonel Redpath opened his coat, and thrust one hand into its inner depths to bring forth a pocketbook and took from it six crisp bills. Folding them once, he pushed the whole lot across the table, and the hand of Natty Nick closed on the blood-money.

Then the Judas of Silver Deck talked in low tones for a minute when the colonel said:

"I like to have a diagram of the underground trail."

Nick took pencil and paper and drew rapidly for a little while, tossed his work to the argus-eyed Russian, and got up.

"Are you going away?" asked Colonel Redpath.

"Away? Great Jupiter! you don't think I'd stay here after this, do you?" cried Nick. "Why, sir, I've sold my head with the information you hold. Give me ten minutes, and I'll be a human bullet shooting through the mountains!"

The answer made the Muscovite smile, and, as his point had been gained, he held out his hand to Natty Nick, and withdrew.

"I guess I didn't miss my man!" fell from his lips as he left the cabin behind. "I once bought a Russian dandy for twenty roubles, but this one was worth more." And, even while he spoke, a man left Natty Nick's shanty, richer than he had ever been—but a traitor!

CHAPTER XII.

THE EXILES' RETREAT.

COLONEL REDPATH was now armed with the information he had been seeking for many months.

True, it had cost six thousand dollars, but what of that? If Natty Nick had held out longer, he could have got more, for the Russian was prepared to buy the secret at almost any price.

He did not care what became of the man who had sold it to him. He might be hunted down by indignant pards, and the blood-money might never do him any good.

The Russian sleuth had already ceased to think of him.

With the secret in his breast, and the important diagram where he considered it safe, Colonel Redpath went direct to his lodgings.

The interior was dark, and in the darkness, as he entered the cabin, he felt a hand find his arm.

"I didn't know where to find you, colonel, so I've been waiting here," whispered a voice that had a familiar sound.

"Cyclone!" ejaculated the Russian. "What is up?"

Coral is gone. Colonel Redpath started a little.

"Not for good?" he ejaculated.

"It looks like it. They've silenced her by sending her off."

"Who did it?"

"Captain Mark. I made the discovery by accident."

"Well, let her go. We can do without her now," replied Redpath.

Cyclone must have caught the tinge of triumph in the Russian's voice.

"Is this all you've been waiting here for?" asked the colonel.

"It's all unless you know that Captain Coldgrip is here."

"I have met the gentleman."

"Well?"

"He is my man yet. But I don't think we shall need his services."

"I hope not. By Jupiter! I would like to

play the game out without a particle of help from him!"

"It shall be done."

Not a word about the business with Natty Nick. The Russian could keep a secret better than the man his money had corrupted.

As we have already mentioned, the cabin occupied by the Russian was a double one, and his room was the guest-chamber, the sole apartment of the kind in Silver Deck.

Of course neither the colonel or Cyclone saw the figure leaning against the wall in the other room.

It was the figure of a powerful man whose ear seemed glued to the logs, and who was taking in enough of the conversation just given to make the whole intelligible.

He did not move till the door opened to let Cyclone out.

"By Jove! it's a regular league, isn't it?" he cried. "Captain Coldgrip, Cyclone and Colonel Redpath! It's a pretty big hand, but we've got to beat it, or the exiles are lost! Let me see. What shall we begin? They know that I sent Coral off, but the colonel says they can win without her. Why didn't the Atlantic sleuth show up at this meeting? Is he on the trail now? I'll set some of my dogs loose. We've got 'em here, Colonel Redpath! Silver Deck is no paradise as you'll find out before the game is over."

The man who left the cabin a short time after the last word, was Mark Million. He glided through the camp until he disappeared in the mouth of the shaft of the best yielding mine.

"Ah! here you are, captain!" exclaimed a man who greeted him in the lamplight that flooded a small but pleasant-looking chamber, pleasant despite its location under ground.

The speaker was Grant Thurston, and as he spoke he threw a glance toward a figure recumbent on a camp cot in another part of the place.

"Well, Thurston, the other man has come," the boss of Silver Deck at once stated.

"Claude Coldgrip?"

"The New York sleuth."

"They are together, then?" cried the exile. "The bloodhounds of two continents have united for the death chase!"

Mark Million saw a young girl spring from the cot, and come toward them.

"Somebody has betrayed us!" she exclaimed, grasping Mark's arm.

"I think not. You must recollect that hunting people is the occupation of these two men." And Mark smiled.

"And their reward is finding them!" answered Medora with bitterness.

"We are not found yet, my child," reassured Grant Thurston, turning upon the girl.

"But, what is to keep the sleuths off?" was the retort. "You know, father, that one of them has tracked us from Russia, and the other from the shores of the Atlantic. Why was I not armed when the stage brought the Palace Scorpion to Silver Deck? The pressure of a trigger would have freed us forever from his evil eye, and from the hand that marked you for life. Let me go up with you, Captain Mark. Stand me face to face with Count Demidoff, and let my hand avenge the persecutions of a Russian villain!"

"That won't do, Medora," answered Mark. "Silver Deck stands between you and the dogs of the trail. There is not a traitor among us all. Take courage. We will baffle the League and the chances are that the Scorpion of the Palace has inflicted his last sting!"

"Thank Heaven for that assurance!" cried Thurston. "I'm getting used to this underground life," he added, with a smile. "It is nothing like the one I lived in Siberia, a name which I cannot mention without a shudder. When you have unmasked him, Captain Mark, let me witness the final act."

"You shall, Thurston." And the head miner of Silver Deck took the exile's hand in a silent pledge of good faith.

"Ah," cried the exile. "If I could only think that there is no informer here!"

"Do you suspect any one?" asked Mark with eagerness.

"Medora does," was the reply, with a slight nod toward the young girl.

Captain Million turned instantly to Medora. "Is this true? Do you think the stars above us look down on a Silver Decker who is purchasable by the League?"

"I do not like to accuse any one," answered Medora, deliberately. "Heaven forbid that I should do so. We have been here four months. One month ago I received a visit from a young man who professed to have fallen in love with me. He swaggered into our cabin when you were all at the mine. His face was flushed and his tongue was thick. As a matter of course, he was not an agreeable visitor, and he soon discovered that he was pouring out his soul to the wrong person. Suddenly his eyes flashed a look of resentment. 'Exiles!' he hissed, raising his hand. 'Hunted like two wolves, aren't you? Mebbe I'll get even one of these days. Wait and see!' and then, with a glance which spoke more than his language, he walked out."

"You never told me this, Medora!" cried

Grant Thurston, looking into his daughter's face.

"I did not want trouble," replied the girl with a smile. "I let the young man go away without replying to his display of passion. I thought it was best; but ever since he has given me looks which say that his hatred still rankles in his bosom."

"His name?" demanded Mark Million.

"Natty Nick," was the reply.

The two men gave each other looks of surprise.

"He's peculiar," remarked the boss miner with a smile. "I would not have selected him as the traitor—"

"I don't call him that!" interrupted the girl. "Remember, I say that he might wish to get even with me, that is all."

"It's worth investigating, Mark," Thurston said.

"I'll do it."

Five minutes later Mark Million was going back to the main shaft.

The way was dark, but he knew it as well as if the sun was shining upon it at that time.

All at once he stopped.

A noise had fallen upon his quick ears, but it was not repeated, and he finally grew tired of listening.

"Mebbe it warn't much, after all," he concluded, moving on again. "I'll see Mr. Natty Nick. We don't want any love-making hyer just now. By Jupiter! I won't allow it!"

Captain Mark went direct to the cabin owned by the dandy of the camp. It was empty.

"Not hyer, eh?" he exclaimed. "Mebbe he's tempting fortune at Quartz Quincy's," and out he went toward the gaming den with a rapid step.

One look over the crowd was enough. Natty Nick was not there!

As he was about to leave the place a man came toward him.

"Captain Mark, what does this night work mean?" asked the miner in a low voice. "Is he trying to buy the secret?"

"Who?—what night work?"

"Why, as I live, I saw Colonel Redpath come from Natty's shanty awhile ago."

Mark Million could hardly keep back a cry.

"Where is Natty now, Bullion?" he asked.

"Isn't he at home?"

"The shanty is empty."

"Mebbe he did sell out, sure enough!"

"He'll wish some day that he never saw starlight if he's betrayed us!" the boss exclaimed. "Search the camp quietly for him. If he is found let me know."

"I will. Ah! here is our last arrival!"

Mark needed but to send a look over his shoulder to see the man who had just entered the den.

It was Captain Coldgrip, and Mark's companion watched him narrowly.

"He wants you, captain," he whispered.

"I guess not."

The next moment the New York detective reached out his hand, and touched Mark Million's arm.

"Are you busy, Captain Mark?" he asked quietly.

"No."

"Then, I would like to see you; but not here."

What did the sleuth want with the head of the mountain camp?

It was a puzzle to Captain Mark.

When the two had passed out of the shanty Captain Coldgrip spoke again.

"To your cabin. It is quiet there."

Mark led the way to his little cabin, his brain busy with a dozen conjectures, and when he had closed the door behind them, he turned and awaited the detective's advance with a faint smile.

"You fellows don't like me," the sleuth laughed. "You wish I was elsewhere just now. I think you're among the number, Captain Mark. I haven't met you since you slipped through my fingers some time ago. It was real clever, too. But, I am not here to tell you this stuff. I am on other business. Are the exiles safe, Captain Mark?"

The boss of Silver Deck drew back, and stared at the American sleuth.

"What exiles?" he cried. "This is no city of refuge?"

"I understand," came quietly over the detective's lips, as he eyed Mark. "Of course you don't want to give them away, and I don't blame you. If you will not answer, I will go ahead on the theory that they are not safe."

"What do you mean? Ain't you in league with Colonel Redpath?"

"In league with a man like him?"

And Captain Coldgrip laughed.

CHAPTER XIII.

CYCLONE PROVES DANGEROUS.

"WHAT war that he said?" cried a man whose black, but shining eyes were close to Mark Million's window. "What did I intimate to the colonel, but something of this kind? He played fast and loose with Coldgrip in New York shortly after he reached this country from

Russia, and it seemed to me that he's a fool for trusting him, now."

It was Cyclone at the window, playing the double roll of eavesdropper and spy. He was playing it with full knowledge of what the results would be if he were caught in the act.

There was a rent in the thick curtain that covered the little window on the inside, and it enabled him to see the two men near the table, Captain Coldgrip and the boss of Silver Deck, whose latest vow was, that he would keep the sleuth-hounds from the Siberian exile and his child.

"Mark ain't going to trust him. I kin see that!" continued Cyclone, as he watched the effect of the detective's laugh on Mark's face. "He's an old bird, Mark Million is, and in an affair o' this kind, he's going to make haste slowly."

Cyclone was a good reader of human nature for a man who had to study it on the face of a mountain tough.

"You think I'm in with Colonel Redpath, I see," said the New York detective, breaking off his laugh rather abruptly.

"I haven't said so," answered Mark evasively.

"But your look, captain! your eyes have tongues!" smiled Coldgrip. "Let me go on now. If the exiles are safe, I want them to remain so."

"Honest Injun, Coldgrip?" demanded Mark.

"I see! You don't want to trust me. Well, let it go, Mark; maybe it were best not to tell me anything about Grant Thurston and his child. I might throw them into the hands of the enemy. Keep your secret, captain. I don't ask you to trust me. I will never ask you to do that."

"Cool as he has the credit o' being, ain't he?" murmured the man at the window. "I can see that he is dead against the count, but why? If Coldgrip wants him, why didn't he take him in New York? Maybe the colonel gave him the slip."

For several seconds Captain Mark made no reply to the detective.

He felt the cutting sarcasm of the sentences, but showed it by no outward sign.

"If I have a secret and choose to keep it, it is no one's concern," he finally said.

"Just as you think, captain," replied Coldgrip, with a wave of the hand. "Shall we call this interview at an end?"

"It is for you to say. You began it, and the end is in your hands. You want me to believe that you are not Colonel Redpath's ally, but you haven't convinced me."

"Remain in the dark," answered the Atlantic spotter. "You want to own a secret; why can't I have one, too?"

Mark Million watched the sport as he moved toward the door.

Cyclone drew back to make himself scarce.

"Let me say ere we part that all is known," spoke the boss of Silver Deck, moving across the floor toward the handsome sleuth.

"All, you say, Captain Mark?"

"Yes. It is known that Colonel Redpath is Count Paul Demidoff, the titled spy of the Russian czar. We know why he is here. He may parade himself before the crowd as Colonel Redpath, who wants to buy a mine, but there are some of us who look deeper than his skin, and see the hidden sting of the Palace Scorpion."

"By Jove! you're good at probing!" Coldgrip confessed.

"Have I guessed him wrongly?"

"You have not."

"But you are his aid. That's what puzzles me!" cried Mark, searching the New Yorker's countenance, over which came another smile, perplexing like the former ones.

"This Russian bloodhound shall never touch his prey!" continued Captain Mark. "Before that, we'll swing him from a limb, or riddle him with bullets!"

"You must not do that," returned the detective.

"Then let the viper crawl from camp! I won't be answerable for what occurs here within the next twenty-four hours, if he stays. This is America, Coldgrip. We don't want foreign sleuths here. And by heavens! we won't tolerate 'em, either!"

Down upon the little table came the camp captain's hand with startling emphasis.

"Twenty-four hours, eh? Is that what you give the colonel?" asked Coldgrip.

"I don't give him one! Hunt him up and tell him that Silver Deck is a dangerous place for Russian counts. I don't want your blood, captain. You did not follow me once when you almost knew you could have caught me. I don't forget some things. But, when you league in with a man like Paul Demidoff, you touch the danger line with your eyes open."

"All right, Captain Mark," laughed the detective. "We will talk all night if we remain here. But, one word ere I go: Keep the exiles where you've got them. Don't let them appear on the scene. By all means, keep the girl, Medora, from seeing the man called Count Demidoff!"

The next moment the door of the cabin opened and shut, and Mark Million found himself its only occupant.

"Those last words appeared honestly spoken," he decided. "By Jupiter! that man is a mystery sure enough. Here he acknowledges that Colonel Redpath is the Russian ferret, and that, when I know he has leagued himself with this same rascal. He tells me to keep the exiles in the dark, which means that I shall protect them. Never fear, Coldgrip! It will be done in style, and if you want to quit Silver Deck with a whole skin, you want to go off now and leave the Russian villain to his end!"

Already Captain Coldgrip was some distance from the cabin.

"I didn't impress Captain Mark very favorably," with a light chuckle. "He is very suspicious, but he'll get his eyes open one of these days. My game is here, but he doesn't see it."

"Can I see you a minute?"

At the question Coldgrip turned, and saw a man barely a step away.

The sky was clear, and the starlight showed his large figure, surmounted by a wide-brimmed hat.

"I am at your service," replied Captain Coldgrip, and then he recognized the man—Cyclone.

"Not in this camp," was the answer.

"Is it important, Cyclone?"

"It is."

The following moment the two men were moving away among the spectral cabins.

How Cyclone, with his lips sealed with determination, watched the man at his side! How he kept pace with Claude Coldgrip as he led him past his own shanty toward the darker shadows of the mountains that hemmed the gold-camp in!

There was much of the eagle's nature in Cyclone.

Once he had moved in a different sphere. There was a time when he was not a camp-rough; but it was long ago, and in a foreign land.

What had changed his condition it is not for us to say at this stage of the proceedings. But Cyclone was not what he had been, although his life had never been a great success.

He showed no signs of halting until the last cabin of Silver Deck was at his back.

He threw a look over his shoulder, but could not see the lights of the camp.

It was a wild place for a conference, when Cyclone's shanty would have answered the purpose.

All at once the Colorado tough came to a halt. The next second he had turned upon the Atlantic ferret.

"Here we are, outside o' Silver Deck," he spoke. "Along here runs the trail which will take a man to Denver. You must go away from here!"

Cyclone spoke with the air of a man who had planned some resolute work.

Did he think that he could drive Claude Coldgrip from the scene of his new game? Was Cyclone to outwit the man who had never been outwitted?

The mountain sport thought he saw the detective's lip curl derisively at the command.

"Is that your decree, Cyclone?" he asked.

"It is mine!"

"What if I refuse to obey?"

"Then you take what comes," was the ready answer.

"Look here, Cyclone—I found you at the Wildcat in Leadville. I did not expect you to play a hand here; but if you wish to play one—if you see a seat at the table and cards for you to play, enter the game and play your part."

"Then you won't go?" came through Cyclone's teeth.

"Not to-night."

The next second the figure of Cyclone appeared to get new stature. He threw one foot back, then the other, and his right hand moved like a bolt toward his hip.

"Hol! that's the game, eh?" exclaimed Coldgrip, and, as the fingers of Cyclone began to close about the butt of a six-shooter, he felt a hand above his collar, a hand that closed with a merciless grip.

"To Denver, my old friend!" laughed the detective. "To Denver, did you say? When did you become Czar of Colorado?" And Cyclone found the triumphant face of the sleuth almost touching his.

The reply was a powerful wrench on Cyclone's part. He threw all his strength into the action. It was the break of a cornered lion for freedom.

At that moment, the detective's foot was thrown upon a pebble which rolled, and in another instant, by a second effort as gigantic as the first, Cyclone broke away with a shout.

Ten feet from the New York ferret he turned with a revolver in his hand. He saw the detective in the starlight, and then, throwing up his hand, he covered him in a second, and fired.

Under the smoke, Cyclone saw a man stop suddenly, then spin toward the nearest bushes, his hat already off, and his hands above his head.

All at once he dropped, turned once on the ground, and was still.

"I've shot in the dark before this," muttered the victorious Cyclone.

CHAPTER XIV.

A HAWK IN THE DOVE COTE.

THE reader will not forget that while Mark Million was emerging from the mine, which had become the hiding-place of the two exiles, he heard a noise, which caused him to stop and listen.

If the boss miner of Silver Deck had investigated at the time, we might conclude our story with the present chapter; but as the sound, which was slight, was not repeated, he left it to die away uncared-for while he went back to camp.

At that moment, Natty Nick's infamy was bearing natural fruit.

The traitor himself was already far away, and a horse was bearing him still further on, for he was flying from the vengeance of men whose natures were not unknown to him.

A man, a stranger, was in the mine.

Through the labyrinth under ground he was pushing with the stealth of a fox, slowly but surely making his way toward that part occupied by father and daughter.

If Mark Million had turned back, or if he had waited a while longer where he heard the sound, unwittingly made by the prowler, he would have matched strength with one of the czar's subjects.

For the man creeping through the darkness was Count Demidoff, the St. Petersburg sleuth, and the triumphant expression that lit up his eyes, told that he considered himself near the end of the long hunt.

Nobody looked for the rascal there.

Grant Thurston and Medora had talked over Captain Mark's wish, and the late events in Silver Deck.

Captain Coldgrip had appeared upon the scene, and this was something the father did not like.

Like Captain Million, he believed that the New York spotter was in the Russian's employ, and it never once entered his head that he might be on the Palace Scorpion's trail.

Medora went back to her couch at last and fell asleep, and after a while her father flung himself upon his blankets not far away. The little lamp that furnished light for the subterranean abode, was turned lower until objects in the chamber were barely discernible.

An hour passed away and then the shadowy figure of a human being appeared at the threshold of the rock-chamber.

The figure was large and powerful, and when it came forward, stepping noiselessly across the floor of the exile's retreat, it stood forth revealed as Colonel Redpath.

In a moment he was leaning over Grant Thurston.

"At last!" he grated. "At last I have found you, but thousands of miles from Siberia, and in the mountain heart of the New World. You were shrewd enough to outwit us in Russia; you baffled the bloodhounds of the mines, and put a sea between yourself and them. But, you forgot that Paul Demidoff still lived, that his vengeance was to know no rest until it was satisfied. Sleep on. I don't want to harm a hair of your head now. I am here to torture you more than you have ever been tortured before. I can make you wish yourself dead, but not by touching you. No, no! I will touch the other one—the Russian beauty who escaped me when I had you before the secret tribunal of the czar's police."

Colonel Redpath crossed the chamber to the fair sleeper whose beautiful face was revealed by the lamp on the wall near by.

Medora was entirely ignorant of his presence, and for several moments the eyes of the Russian regarded her with looks of savage conquest.

All at once he stooped over the girl, and one of his hands dropped upon her face.

There was a slight movement by Medora, her eyes opened and became fixed on the figure above her, but before she could comprehend the situation, she was lifted from the cot and borne away.

It was quick work, for the Russian sleuth understood that agility was needed there and then.

Across the cavern he rushed with the bewildered girl, and disappeared among the dark corridors, while Thurston slept on totally unconscious of what had taken place.

Paul Demidoff had not come to the mine unprepared. With the care of a practiced villain, he had planned his future campaign for some time ahead.

When he reached the purer air, he was not surprised to see that Medora no longer needed watching like a hawk, for she hung limp and motionless on his arm.

"They laughed at me when I left Russia in search of them!" he laughed, looking down into the girl's face. "They said the world would swallow them up, but I knew that I would eventually find them, and secure the prize I played for in the shadow of the palace."

Colonel Redpath found himself on the solid ground above the mine with his captive.

It was a short time after the coup under ground and his face still showed the signal triumph he had obtained.

"What do I care for Captain Coldgrip, now?"

he laughed, looking toward Silver Deck with a light here and there, and with the gambling den located by its large window. "He can go back to his old beat, and take up the trail he lost nearly a year ago. And Cyclone, who is inclined to be a little tricky, can remain here and become Silver Deck's citizen again. I am able to take care of myself."

Not far from the mouth of the mine, and where the shadows of the mountain pines were darkest, Colonel Redpath found two horses.

They were not his; no.

When he came to Silver Deck his only property was a valise, and it had not grown into two swift steeds that knew the trails about Silver Deck almost as well as the miners knew them.

Colonel Redpath had not hesitated to strip the camp stables. He had taken the last two horses, and with a grim smile, too, for he knew that pursuit would have to be made on foot.

He lifted Medora to the back of one of the steeds, and mounted the other. Then, as the girl was not able to ride without assistance, he transferred her to the horse he rode, but gripped the bridle-rein of its mate.

"This is the Scorpion's big hand. Ha! ha!" he laughed, as he started the animals off. "I'd like to see Claude Coldgrip or anybody else beat it with an American card! It can't be done! My compliments to you when you find the nest-bird missing, Grant Thurston. This is an arrow in your side—this is the deepest wound Paul Demidoff could inflict on his old enemy!"

Away went the horses over the same trail taken not long before by Coral, when Mark Million conducted her from camp into forced exile.

The stars showered the earth with their golden light, and a light spot in the far east, between two mountains, told where the moon would soon silver both mountain and trail.

The road was well defined for some distance beyond Silver Deck.

The two horses kept side by side, and went along at a good gait.

Suddenly Colonel Redpath felt a movement on his arm, and a downward glance into Medora's face showed him her eyes fastened upon him.

There was now a gleam of recognition in their liquid depths. Medora, for the first time, seemed to realize what had happened.

Her first thought was not of herself, but of the father left behind.

"Ah, Paul Demidoff, I know you!" she exclaimed. "You found us in the mine. There was a traitor in Silver Deck, and may the vengeance of Heaven find the guilty wretch! But what did you do to my father? Did you strike him before you completed your work?"

"Do you think I would, Medora?" smiled the Russian.

"You struck him once," was the reply. "You dealt your first blow in Russia!"

"You think so, eh?"

"We know it. It was your scheming that had him branded for life and sent to the mines of Siberia. That was your work, Paul Demidoff, and this is yours, as well."

The Russian sleuth answered with a triumphant look.

"My father? What of him? You have not answered me," cried Medora.

"He will waken to find the nest empty," was the reply. "I did not touch him, Medora."

The girl let slip a breath of relief.

"You wounded him deep by withholding your hand," she exclaimed. "He will lose his reason when he realizes your work. It will torture him more than the mines of Siberia did."

A smile came to the Scorpion's lips.

Torture was what he wanted to inflict.

"Where is this to end?" asked the girl.

"Let the future determine," replied the Russian. "They will try to beat me, but they will fail as your father has done."

"They?" echoed Medora.

"Your father and his new friends," exclaimed Colonel Redpath. "But what can they do to start with when we are mounted, and they have not a horse to their names? Don't you see what kind of a hand I hold?—and that will beat the best combination in the world."

"But this is not Russia!" cried Medora.

"I know it. It is better than Russia for me just now. In the heart of this New World we can bury ourselves, and the keenest sleuths cannot find the trail. I don't have to go back to czar's empire. I left it to find the Siberian exile and his daughter, and who will say that Paul Demidoff has failed?"

Medora shut her eyes to prevent seeing the proud smile of the palace sleuth, and for some time the horses bore them on without a word.

"Your tool joined you at Silver Deck!" suddenly said the girl. "Is he to remain behind and cover your trail?"

"Oh, you mean Captain Coldgrip?" guessed the Russian.

"Yes, the New York sleuth whom you hired with Russian gold."

Colonel Redpath laughed. "I don't care what becomes of Captain Coldgrip," he answered. "I am sure the Yankee ferret is nothing to me. He can go back to his Broadway den if he wants to."

"Is he no longer your man, Count Demidoff?" asked Medora eagerly.

"No!" answered the Russian in mad tones.

"But you hired him once?"

The Muscovite ferret did not reply.

"Very well," continued Medora. "If this man turns against you, if you have thrown off Captain Coldgrip, the game now in your hands may be in his some time."

"Ho! never, Medora!" cried the Russian, bursting into a derisive laugh. "This New York sleuth is not what he is cracked up to be. I know a case in which he was completely baffled. Ha! ha! it was a signal failure! Let him turn on me if he wants to! I expect to hear of Mark Million setting all Silver Deck after me like a pack of hunters. I don't care! And as for the New York spotter—Pshaw! I've beaten that Broadway ferret before!"

The face of the beautiful exile turned away from the Russian's boastful glance.

"I may yet trust this American sleuth," she murmured.

CHAPTER XV.

VENGEANCE MAD.

WITH the echo of his swift night-shot in his ears, Cyclone re-entered Silver Deck.

A strange stillness hovered over the mountain camp.

"He would not take the trail I showed him, so I sent him on another which is the darkest one he ever struck. There was a belief that nobody could beat this Coldgrip; but what have I done?" And the rough laughed to himself at his red work just beyond the borders of the camp.

Cyclone was anxious to find Colonel Redpath, but the Russian did not turn up to his hand. As the moments waned he grew bolder.

Nobody had seen him decoy the New York detective from the cluster of cabins, therefore the shooting had no witness.

Cyclone entered the saloon and sought a place at one of the tables.

As it was whispered that he had come back from Leadville pretty flush, he was speedily accommodated, and in a little while the late proprietor of the Wildcat was deep in a game.

Nobody took particular notice of Cyclone. Mark Million was not in the place when he entered, but he came in a while later and watched the various games with some interest.

"They don't know it yet," thought Cyclone. "It won't be found out before daylight, and Captain Mark ain't going to care who dropped the Atlantic sleuth."

While Cyclone won and lost over the rough pine boards, a man was sleeping on some blankets many feet below the mountain camp.

When he moved and opened his eyes, the lamp fastened to the wall seemed to be burning with more than its usual brilliance.

"Medora! my child! In God's name, where are you?" suddenly cried the man, leaving the cot in a second and springing across the chamber.

The next instant he started back from the little bed that touched the wall, and stared at it like a man in a maze.

Again he sounded the name he had just spoken and louder than before; this time in accents of mingled fear and anguish.

"She is gone!" he exclaimed, "while I slept the infamous villain stole a march on us. She would be here if he had not come. Who is the traitor? Is this some of the new arrival's work? Is your hand in this, Claude Coldgrip?"

Grant Thurston had the wild eyes of a man on the brink of madness.

Medora was not on the couch where he had seen her sink to sleep with his nightly kiss on her forehead.

Her absence told him that the Russian trail dog had found his prey.

All at once Grant Thurston turned away with a cry, and rushed from the mine.

He knew the network of corridors which the men of Silver Deck had made in the bowels of the earth; he had threaded them in the dark and alone before that time, and because fear and vengeance lent him wings, as it were, he did not miss his way now.

In the air beyond the mine and under the stars he did not stop a moment. He rushed over the ground between the mine and the camp and dashed into the saloon.

Exclamations of astonishment burst from the throat of every man who saw him.

Why had he given away the secret Silver Deck had sworn to keep?

Here he had come back when his hunters were in camp, and it could no longer be said that the exiles were not among the miners.

A sudden change crossed Cyclone's face when he saw the excited man.

"They can't hide 'em any longer," congratulated the Colorado sport. "Here is Thurston himself and o' course the girl, isn't far off. If the colonel war here now, that'd be a picnic, and no mistake. Ha! thar goes Mark to him."

At that moment the boss of Silver Deck started toward Thurston.

"In God's name, what brings you here?" cried Mark Million.

"My child! my child! Medora—is—gone!"

A dozen men started to their feet.

All had heard the cry, and the intelligence seemed to strike them like an electric spark.

"Medora gone?" echoed Captain Mark, clutching the arm of the white-faced father, as he lowered his voice with a quick glance at Cyclone. "She may have wandered from the room."

"No! the Muscovite ferret found her—found her while I slept!" was the answer. "May the blight of God fall upon me for sleeping when he was near!"

A wild and excited crowd surrounded Grant Thurston. Cyclone was on the outside of it with eyes and ears open, and filled with an astonishment which he could not conceal.

He did not believe that the Russian had made the swoop. It could not be. Paul Demidoff had obtained no knowledge of the exiles' whereabouts. Grant Thurston was mistaken.

Mark Million saw that the only way to cool down the excited man was to get him away from there, so he took him tenderly by the arm and led him out.

Several miners ran down the well-beaten path that led to the mine.

Plunging into the dark mouth, they hastened to the exiles' abode and found it empty.

That was not all.

In the dust of several narrow passages they discovered footprints which they all declared belonged to a stranger. The boots of Silver Deck were all alike; this one was totally different.

Back they went with the news, but some time had elapsed.

As they were rushing forward with their report, the stage from Leadville swung into the main street and came down in a cloud of dust.

It was unusual for that vehicle to reach Silver Deck at night from any direction; but now and then some men with plenty of money could get the driver to push forward at all hours.

"By Jove! thar's the young chick who came in with Colonel Redpath!" cried several men as the vehicle was halted in front of the open door of the ranch.

"What fetches him back so soon? Why, he's barely had time to turn around in Leadville, Mortimer he called. Mortimer who?—tenderfoot or sport?"

The young man had by this time stepped nimbly from the stage, and was walking toward the ranch a few feet away.

"Mebbe he's connected with Colonel Redpath? By Jove! it looks that way," groaned a stalwart man. "We don't want any o' the spawn byer, an' if he ar' thar exile-hunter's friend, he'd better get thar driver ter take 'im on ter Tartarus or some other seaport!"

Meanwhile Grant Thurston, somewhat cooler, had told Mark Million all he knew about Medora's disappearance which, as we know was not much. He was certain that the Russian had made a successful swoop, and with him he connected the New York detective, Captain Coldgrip.

"I'm not so certain about the captain," said Mark, with a shake of the head as he recalled the detective's last words in the interview he had had with him. "He wanted us to keep you safe."

Grant Thurston started.

"Did Claude Coldgrip say this?" he cried.

"He did."

"It must be a game—a scheme to allay your fears. Why, we were routed out of New York by Captain Coldgrip. He was then in Paul Demidoff's employ. If he was then the Russian's sleuth, why not now? No, Mark Million; you must not trust the American spotter. Those two ferrets hunt together, and their game is the same. My word for it that Captain Coldgrip is miles away from Silver Deck at this moment. But, how did they find us out? Was there a traitor in camp?"

Before Captain Mark could reply the cabin door was opened and a miner appeared.

"There isn't a horse in the camp," he cried.

"There ought to be three," was the response.

"Don't you see?" exclaimed Thurston. "Three horses for Colonel Redpath, the captain, and their prisoner! That tells the tale; that must convince you, Captain Mark!"

Mark Million looked nonplused.

"What is the report from the mine?" he asked.

"The boys went there, didn't they?"

"They found nothing. What fetched the stage in at this time?"

"From Denver?"

"From Leadville."

"Somebody has come!" decided Mark. "Will you stay here, Thurston?"

"No! I am to be chained or hidden no longer!" cried the Siberian exile, starting toward the door. "With Medora in the hands of the hawks, why should I hide longer in Silver Deck?"

The three men were already moving toward the mountain ranch as if they knew by instinct where to find the stage's passengers, if any had come in.

Mark was the first to cross the threshold.

"Ho! Mortimer is back! Something always told me that we hadn't seen the last of him!" he mentally exclaimed, as he caught sight of the young man who had just stepped from the vehicle.

At that moment the eyes of the two men met, and then Grant Thurston pushed forward and halted in front of Mortimer.

His eyes still flashed with the vengeful light that had not left them for a moment since his discovery of Medora's abduction.

"Are you hunting your master?" he cried, leaning toward the young man with clinched hands.

"My master?" echoed Mortimer, as a smile played with his finely shaped lips. "I have no master."

"I mean the brute you came here with from Denver the other day. Ah! we know him as well as you do. Colonel Redpath, eh? You've come a little too late to find your captain."

It was evident that Mortimer's surprise was genuine.

"He isn't connected with the count. I'd bet my head on it!" asserted Cyclone who stood where he could see the young man's face.

"I'm not seeking the man you mention," he replied to Thurston in calm tones.

"Mebbe it's Captain Coldgrip, then!"

The young man gave a sudden start which all saw.

"Yes, sir. I want to see Captain Coldgrip," he promptly answered.

"It's all the same—whether you want to see the foreign sleuth or the native one!" cried the exile. "It is the same old league against the innocent; the same dastardly scheme botched in Russia! So you want to see Captain Coldgrip, the Yankee detective? You hear him, Captain Mark? This is another member of the gang. Stand back, men of Silver Deck, and I'll make the reddest beginning a game of vengeance ever had!"

But Mark Million's hand held fast Grant Thurston's wrist as it came up.

"I don't understand this," said the young man, as the boss of the camp held the exile's arm.

"Why is Captain Coldgrip such a fiend here that I have to be assaulted for being his friend?"

"It's a long story," answered Mark.

"Let 'im answer for himself! By Jupiter! hyer's the Atlantic sleuth now!"

Nobody saw Mortimer from that moment, and one man on the outside of the crowd behind him ducked his head and disappeared.

A man had just come in, a man with a large hat that had fresh dark stains, and a bullet-hole through the brim!

"That is the fiend!" cried Thurston, breaking from Mark's grip, and starting toward the newcomer.

"Where is my child, Captain Coldgrip? In God's name, where is Medora?"

The city sleuth turned toward Captain Mark.

"Is this man Grant Thurston?" he asked.

"I am no one else!" admitted the exile. "My child has fallen into the hands of the Palace Scorpion."

Coldgrip struck the counter with his fist.

"By the living God, I'll find her!" he cried.

CHAPTER XVI.

SLEUTH AGAINST SLEUTH.

"A BULLET-HOLE through the rim of his hat, and probably a furrow along the temple, nothin' more!" muttered a man, whose figure was protected from the detective's gaze by the crowd of surprised miners. "He wouldn't mind findin' me first, but he'll not enjoy that pleasure if I can help it. I don't want to see Captain Coldgrip after what happened just outside o' camp," and Cyclone took good care to keep the crowd between him and the man who had startled all by swearing that he would find Medora.

He did not see Grant Thurston staring at the city sleuth like a man lost in amazement, nor did he see the exile spring forward to halt with an exclamation of wonder before Claude.

"Say that again!" he cried. "Let me look into your eyes when you speak the oath. You find my child for me? What does it mean, Captain Coldgrip? Not long ago you were Paul Demidoff's man!"

"Not for long," answered the detective, a smile playing with his lips.

At this moment a man creeping around the crowd reached the door.

The back of Captain Coldgrip was turned toward him, and a moment later he cleared the ranch threshold and was gone.

"The next time I'll look at my dead!" averred Cyclone, grimly, throwing a glance toward the ranch as he turned away. "If Colonel Redpath did make a successful swoop, he wants to keep out o' this man's way. When Claude Coldgrip told Thurston that he will find Medora, he will do nothing else, and at the same time he'll show the colonel a crushing hand. Don't waste any time, count. Push forward with your prize, the one you played for in Russia. I propose to make myself immediately scarce, for the man whom I tumbled with a bullet isn't likely to handle me with gloves, if I fall into his clutches."

Meantime, Grant Thurston had slowly come to the conclusion that Captain Coldgrip's unexpected oath had not been couched in idle words.

"You must know this young man," spoke

Mark Million, addressing the detective, as he glanced at Mortimer, the youth who had come in on the stage.

The two men exchanged significant glances.

"Gentlemen, this is Mortimer," explained Captain Coldgrip to the crowd. "He has a perfect right to be here at this time, and I can say that he has come to take a hand in this game. You see this," he went on, taking off his hat and holding it up so that the track of Cyclone's bullet was plainly visible to all. "These are the compliments of one of your old citizens," and his hand touched the rent and the flesh-wound along his temple. "I was invited to retire from Silver Deck by this individual, and when I concluded to remain there was a little trigger-work—like this."

"Name him, captain!" cried the crowd. "Out with the handle of the man who tried his hand and eye on you."

"Let him go," was the answer. "There may come a time of reckoning; there probably will," and the eyes of the handsome speaker seemed to snap.

"War it Cyclone? He war hyar when you came in; but he's not hyar now."

The detective's smile answered the question, and the crowd drew back to confirm the speaker's observation.

"Come, Mortimer," resumed the sleuth to the young man, who had been watching him with an impatience which he made no attempt to conceal.

Mortimer went forward.

"When will you begin the hunt?" asked Grant Thurston, eagerly. "Every moment that my child remains in that villain's power is torture to me. I am going to trust you, Captain Coldgrip, you, the man who ran us out of New York and forced us to take to the wilds of the great West. I am going to trust you, I say. God help you if you deceive me! But, you will not."

"Give me a little time," was the reply. "A trail never gets cold for me. I want to see this young man now. Come, Mortimer."

The men of Silver Deck saw the detective walk with the youth from the ranch.

"What do you think?" suddenly cried Thurston, clutching Mark Million's arm. "Can we trust this spotter? Dare we send Captain Coldgrip on the trail, and remain away ourselves?"

"Who says we've got to keep back?" demanded Captain Mark. "I want nothing better than to hunt this Russian dog to the end of his trail! You can trust Claude Coldgrip. He will take the trail, and do his part; but you must not forget that he is to play against the coolest and greatest rascal that ever set foot on our shores—the Scorpion of the czar's palace."

Captain Coldgrip said but little to Mortimer until they reached a cabin not far from the mountain ranch.

"A little too late, Mortimer," announced the detective. "The bird was here, but he has flown."

"I know it now," was the response. "It is plain that the man in whose company I came from Denver was the very person we want."

A faint smile came to the sleuth's lips.

"Yes, Colonel Redpath is Count Paul Demidoff, the Russian whose one great crime, committed shortly after his coming to this country, changed the whole tenor of your life."

"If I had but known it!" flashed Mortimer. "Why, I was hours alone in the stage with him! What an opportunity I had! But, it was not to be," he added, after a pause. "The second part of my trail is to begin at Silver Deck; but I have rejoined you, captain, and I am satisfied."

"You did not find me in Leadville," smiled the detective.

"No. I turned back as quickly as possible. If you were not in Leadville, I argued, you had gone to Silver Deck, for your last dispatch told me that your man was likely to be found among these mountains."

"You see, Mortimer, that my hunt for Medora includes the Russian scoundrel," resumed Coldgrip.

"Certainly. You are not to go alone!" cried the young man.

"I would prefer it."

"Let me take the trail with you. You know my desires: you have heard my oath!" continued Mortimer. "I never saw the face of the Russian until I encountered it at the Grand Hotel in Denver, and then how should I know that Colonel Redpath was the man whom I want? It may be a long trail, Captain Coldgrip."

"I have won on long hunts."

"It may be a dangerous hunt. The tiger is apt to turn on the hunters."

"Tigers have turned on me before," was the cool answer.

Mortimer looked amazed at the man before him.

"There is no telling which way the man went," he went on.

"We will find the trail. He went on horseback. What is more, he took the last horses in Silver Deck."

Mortimer started.

"Then we are in the lurch sure enough!" he exclaimed. "There are no horses nearer than Leadville."

"None?" asked the detective, smiling. "How did you get here, young man?"

"The stage brought me."

"And good horses pull it over the mountains."

"But the driver may not submit to being robbed."

"We will see. Let that go for a moment. You may depend upon it, Mortimer, that I am not going to start afoot after the Russian. The horse that brought me from Leadville died a few hours after I reached Silver Deck. Now, will you obey me?"

"I don't know," answered the young man, with a doubtful shake of the head. "I came into this country to find the fiend whose hand blighted my whole life. I know that he still lives; I am now on his trail. You are going to keep me back while you pursue alone. Is this right, Captain Coldgrip? I am the son of Ralph Romaine. Over the grave of my father I swore to find this Russian Satan. You heard the oath. Do you want to force me from the track of vengeance at this stage of the game?"

Captain Coldgrip was looking coolly into the flushed face of the young man, who spoke with a fervor that filled his veins almost to bursting.

"I see," he said, calmly. "You don't want to obey me, and yet I have promised that you shall be in at the death. This man comes from the empire of giants, and with the name of being invincible. He comes from the shadow of the imperial palace after two persons whose lives he wrecked by his infamy. I did not know Paul Demidoff when he first came to me and engaged me to help him run down Grant Thurston and his child. For a time I was in the Scorpion's employ. I did chase the exiles from their hiding place in New York, and I did it as the Russian's employee, as you might say. But then came the crime which has darkened your life, Mortimer. You sought me out and put me on the new trail. What did I discover?—that a giant committed the deed, that he was a foreigner, and, finally, that the blood in his veins was Russian!"

"You told me that, but you did not, at the time, tell me about the exiles."

"No; I still wanted to find Grant Thurston and his child, for, in my search for them, I had discovered that he was American, although his wife, Medora's mother, was a Russian. Don't you see how the two trails came together? I knew that in hunting the exiles I would find a certain big Russian who left New York soon after the crime that struck you down. It is plain now, is it not, Mortimer?"

"Nothing can be plainer!" exclaimed the young man.

"Now," and Captain Coldgrip leaned toward Mortimer and touched his arm with a hand that inspired him with confidence. "Before an hour I will be on the trail again. Go away from Silver Deck. Leave it to the pards and to Grant Thurston."

"He will not remain!" cried Mortimer.

"We will see. Go to San Francisco."

"If?" exclaimed the young man, starting back. "I see! you are determined to drive me off the trail."

"It is because I don't want this Russian tiger to turn on the son of his victim," answered the detective.

Mortimer left the rough chair he occupied, and walked to the one window of the cabin in silence.

The eyes of Captain Coldgrip followed him and watched him while he stood there fighting a mental battle.

"I have come thousands of miles to meet this man!" he exclaimed turning suddenly and confronting the untiring sleuth. "You are the only living man whom I will obey."

"Then you will go to 'Frisco?" came over the detective's lips.

"I will go," assented Mortimer. "I need not tell you to follow this trail to the bitter end, Captain Coldgrip. I look to you for vengeance, for justice! If the tiger turns on you, if the Muscovite assassin gets the upper hand, I give you leave to strike for me; but not until then. Remember! not until then!"

The New York detective held out his hand, and the two men clasped in the lamp-light.

"To-morrow I will be on the road to Frisco, while you, captain—"

"I will be on the trail of this Russian sleuth."

"Sleuth against sleuth!" ejaculated Mortimer.

"But not for the first time in my life," was the reply. "Now let us go down and break the stage team."

Thirty minutes later a man mounted a horse in front of the mountain ranch and looked down into the face of Grant Thurston, whose hand rested on his knee.

"God speed you, Captain Coldgrip," cried the exile.

"The devil take you!" growled a man in the shanty's shadow, and the detective rode away.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CHAMPION OF YELLOW JACKET.

It was a night seldom witnessed in the Wild West, and nowhere else was it to be found in its wild picturesqueness than in Yellow Jacket.

Yellow Jacket was a large mining-town on the Southern borders of Nevada, and, while it possessed many odd features not to be found in places of its sort, it was famous for its jumping-matches.

Whenever one of these exhibitions was to take place, people came in from miles around, from the camps of California, Arizona, and Nevada. Yellow Jacket threw down its mining-tools for the time, and put on the airs of a city on show-day.

Money and dust changed hands freely and without growling, on these occasions. Everybody was admitted to the contest on an equality; the Indian contended with the white man, and several Chinamen had executed some marvelous leaps.

Yellow Jacket was enjoying one of these festive occasions when we transport the readers to it.

Some of the best jumpers in the Wild West were stripped for the contest, and betting ran high.

It was the afternoon of a pleasant, though not sultry, day in the heart of autumn.

The town had swelled largely in population, and some of the faces present had never been seen there before.

The exhibition grounds were situated at the edge of the town, where the ground was level and well adapted to the exercise.

At one end of the allotted space a black-board had been erected on the upright posts, and some one, presumably the most artistic scribe in the neighborhood, had chalked thereon the prizes and the rules of the match.

The crowd was composed almost entirely of men. There were men of all conditions of physical manhood, and almost of all colors. In the ranks were seen the Indian, the negro, the swarthy white man, and the almond-eyed Mongolian.

All were eager for the match to open, for those who were not to participate had money up on the result, and wanted to win.

Among the spectators who watched the preliminaries with a good deal of interest was a man who had but lately crossed the precincts of Yellow Jacket.

He was a typical wild Westerner, well-built, dark of skin, long hair, and eagle eye, and clad to match his looks.

"Who's to jump?" he asked a man at his side, a nervous little fellow who had bet all his money as his actions indicated.

"Some o' ther jumpin' daisies o' the world," was the answer. "Haven't you never seen a Yellow Jacket jumpin' match?"

"It is my first one."

"So? But you've heard o' the game?"

"Yes."

"It's known the world over. Who's to jump? In my estimation, sir, thar's only one man what kin jump."

"Is he of Yellow Jacket?" modestly asked the stranger.

"You kin bet yer eyes he ar'! The jumpers what come hyer ter rake in our dust'd like ter bar him out; but they can't sir; they can't, for Yellow Jacket is open to the world. I'll give you a tip if you want hit, stranger. Put yer money on Broncho Buck."

The speaker lowered his voice when he volunteered this "pointer," and his manner told that he had put up his own wealth on his champion jumper.

"I'd like to see the man first," was the reply.

"That's natural. I never back a hoss till I've sized him up; never, sir! Broncho Buck is yonder—the fellow trying his grip with that young Indian."

It was not difficult to see the champion, for he was at that time testing his grip with a red-skin whose belt, adorned with a bit of yellow ribbon, told that he had entered himself in the match.

"He looks like a jumper," remarked the stranger, after a brief inspection of Broncho Buck as it was to be had at that distance.

"A kangaroo ar' nothin' ter a Broncho!" exclaimed the little man. "Just wait till he quits the ground. Why, he kin stay in the air just as long as he wants ter. To day's champion ar' in his skin. An' the other galoots know hit too!"

"I want to see this champion," decided the stranger as he glided from the little sport's side. "Can it be possible that I have found the rascal in Yellow Jacket?"

A little later he stood within a few feet of Broncho Buck, and for the next five minutes he studied him with searching eyes.

All at once the master of ceremonies stepped to the black-board, and doffed his hat. The crowds drew back, knowing what was coming, and instantly the Babel of tongues grew still.

Then in a loud voice the man read the rules of the match, and repeated the prizes with peculiar emphasis.

"The first match is a running jump, one trial, the best man to take the prize. Entries: Lean Wolf, the young Comanche, and Ah Jung the spring-board of the Celestials."

A laugh greeted the little pleasantry at Ah Jung's expense, and at one end of the ground appeared the slender form of the red-skin.

Next moment some one cried: "Clear the way! go!" and the Indian came toward the line like a deer.

Suddenly he sprang forward and shot through the air like a catapult's bolt, landing far enough away to call forth exclamations of wonder from the spectators.

It was a marvelous jump, and the young Comanche was excusable for the flash of triumph that lit up his eye when he turned to watch his yellow competitor.

Ah Jung was the recipient of several cheers as he started, and when he landed several men leaned forward and declared that he had actually "tied" Lean Wolf!

After this several other jumps were made, and money lost was paid promptly and in the best of humor.

"When does Broncho Buck jump?" asked the man whom we saw last studying the face of the champion of the camp.

"Oh, he's entered to beat the winner of the most stakes," was the answer. "We always reserve him for this, and he has never failed us."

"Where is he from?"

"That's hard to tell. He came here some time ago, jumped and beat the whole kit, and since then he's been Yellow Jacket's stand-by. Now, sir, if you want to put up anything, you can do it safely on Broncho. He never disappoints."

It was the same advice, with the same assurance; but the stranger did not offer to invest any money in the champion's jumping qualities.

The result of the various matches was that, at four o'clock, Lean Wolf, the Comanche had taken more prizes than any other contestant.

The Indian's backers were jubilant, and were eager to match him against the jumping prodigy of the mountain city.

Yellow Jacket was standing nobly by her champion. Not one of her citizens dared to bet on any one else, and it is safe to say that the wealth of the town was up on Broncho Buck.

Lean Wolf's friends were those who had come from a distance, and all had confidence in their man.

It was pretty generally known that the Indian had been in training for some time, and that he had in reserve powers enough to make Broncho Buck tremble for his laurels.

The stranger took his station in front of the spot where the rival champions would end their jumps.

He was cool and watchful, and his eye seldom left Broncho Buck for a second.

"I said I'd do it on sight, and I'm going to keep my word!" he muttered, when he saw the two jumpers appear at the upper end of the ground ready for the signal.

The Indian was to jump first, a running jump, from a line on the ground.

By this time the sun had dropped behind a wooded mountain spur, and the jumping ground was cast in shadow, although it was by no means dark.

Lean Wolf was confident, though not boastful in his look.

Ready to throw himself forward at the signal, he stood at the end of the ground harboring his breath.

"Ready!" rung out the voice of the master of ceremonies. "Clear the track!—Go!"

Once more the Indian came forward, touched the line with his toes, and jumped. A wild shout rent the air as he struck, men ran forward, looked a moment, threw up their sombreros and yelled themselves hoarse.

Lean Wolf had outdone himself!

The Indian's training had not been in vain, for, up to that time he had made the champion jump of Yellow Jacket.

It was some minutes before the uproar was quelled.

The Comanche's backers ran hither and thither, shaking their wallets at the men of Yellow Jacket, and offering odds which were received in silence, for, to tell the truth, Lean Wolf had stunned the crowd.

What would their champion do now?

The Indian's jump was measured, and some one reported it in a low tone to Broncho Buck.

"I'll beat it!" said the white champion through his teeth, as he gathered himself for the trial, and Yellow Jacket took hope.

It was a moment of suspense, on every side. Lean Wolf's backers were confident and exulting; the pards of Yellow Jacket silent, but trustful.

"Here he comes!" passed from lip to lip as Broncho Buck was seen to leap from the starting stake.

He did not seem to touch the ground.

All at once the stranger at the end of the plot cocked a revolver at his side. It was just as the champion of Yellow Jacket threw himself forward.

Broncho Buck touched the jumping line, and passed into the air.

The next moment the startling crack of a revolver was heard, sharp and decisive it was, and the figure in the air executed a sudden half somerset, and struck the ground with a sickening thud!

It took the crowd a half minute to realize what had happened, and they were called to

their senses by the stranger who had backed out clear of all, and stood erect with a revolver in each hand.

"Kill him! It is the enemy's trick! shoot the bound to pieces!"

These cries rose from the throats of the pards of Yellow Jacket, and in the midst of the uproar, the stranger's hands went up, and the six-shooter covered the men who faced him.

"I'm not for the Indian," he answered over the leveled weapons. "The man who got my bullet, doesn't deserve to breathe the air of God's country. I didn't expect to find him here, but I promised myself to kill him on sight. Broncho Buck is he? I know the time, and it wasn't long ago, when he had another name!"

The crowd heard him with fingers resting inside of trigger guards.

"Who are you?" blurted some one.

"That's neither here nor there," was the answer. "But if you want to know, I am Mark Million, of Silver Deck, and the man yonder is Natty Nick, who, for money paid by one of the biggest devils on top o' ground, betrayed a young girl! I didn't come here to do this, but the sight of the traitor was enough for me, and thar he is!"

A strange silence followed the statement, and the speaker walked toward the mountain's base, but with his face to the thunderstruck crowd.

When he turned away he was among the shadows of the young pines, and then, like a specter, Mark Million disappeared from the pards of Yellow Jacket.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT YELLOW JACKET'S BAR.

TREASON had received its natural reward.

The unmasking of Natty Nick was as great a surprise to the spectators of the jumping match as the death-shot had been.

The dandy of Silver Deck, whom we saw ride from camp after betraying the exiles into the hands of the Russian, had already lost his blood money at the mountain keno tables of the Wild West, and, quite naturally, as a matter of course, had drifted penniless to Yellow Jacket to meet his end at the avenging hand of the Colorado sport.

This tragic affair ended the jumping-match.

The Comanche's backers were at first disposed to claim the stakes, but a show of teeth by the Yellow Jacket crowd, effected a compromise which was called satisfactory by all parties.

"It was the coolest thing ever done in these parts," ejaculated one of a group of big men who almost filled Yellow Jacket's best ranch several hours after the startling event. "The Lean Wolf crowd swore the killer wasn't connected with 'em in any way, but I don't swallow the assertion. His story was a corked-up affair. Mark Million, of Silver Deck, eh? That's a ranch away up in Colorado, isn't it?"

"Between Denver and Leadville," put in some one.

The speaker was instantly confronted by the man who had first spoken.

"War you ever thar?" was the prompt question.

"I've seen it."

"Did you ever hear o' Mark Million?"

"He used to be there, I believe."

"Mebbe thar is some truth in his story, after all. Whar's ther man what came hyer with the girl some time ago. He mentioned Silver Deck once, I think. He promised to come back and see the match."

"He war hyer ter-day and had money up on Broncho Buck."

"No! I didn't see him."

"Praps not, Tucson Tony. He masqueraded in strange duds for some reason. I haven't seen him since the killin' o' Broncho."

"Blamed if he claimed his money if ye'r talkin' about the big man with the full reddish beard," exclaimed another member of the group.

"That's the man, Orion. Didn't claim his winnings, eh?"

"Never came for it," was the reply. "He put up two hundred on Broncho the moment he set eyes on him. Broncho fell a little beyond the Injun's jump, and I call that winning. I held the big man's money, and had my mind set to pay it over if he called. But, as I've said, I haven't seen him since the shot."

The strangers who had been attracted to Yellow Jacket by the jumping match had nearly all departed.

A few lingered to lose their dust at the camp tables. The corpse of Natty Nick had been carried to the pines on the mountain where a few rough hands had given it a better burial than it deserved.

Yellow Jacket was in mourning mainly because its champion had been snatched away, and that on the eve of his greatest success. If Mark Million had appeared to the disgruntled sports during their discussion of his shot, he would have been forced to defend himself against the revolvers of the Nevada camp.

Sixty days had passed since the swoop of Colonel Redpath at Silver Deck.

Captain Coldgrip had not been heard from, and the silence respecting him had lowered him in the estimation of the mountain pards.

What had become of the New York detective? Was he still on the Russian's trail, or, had he rejoined his old employer, proving that his oath to find Medora for the distracted father was naught but an infamous deception?

Grant Thurston still clung to the Colorado camp. He went but seldom to the mine which no longer knew Mark Million's fostering care, for the boss of Silver Deck had departed, with a look of settled sternness on his face.

Whenever the stage came in Thurston was the first man to reach it. Eagerly he eyed the passengers, if it had any, and he always had one look for the driver which made that worthy shake his head.

The exile got no letters, and no verbal information from the outside world. He seemed as completely forgotten in Silver Deck as he had been in the dreaded mines of the frozen North.

He had one mastering thought, and it was about Medora.

Nobody said anything to him about Captain Coldgrip's quest, but the miners believed that he had lost confidence in the Atlantic sleuth.

Let us go back to Yellow Jacket.

To the discussion about the wild termination of the jumping-match, but more especially interested in the red-bearded individual who had failed to claim his stakes, a man was listening with all his senses on the alert.

He was not a citizen of Yellow Jacket.

Clad in common clothes that would let him pass anywhere among the gold-camps of Southern Nevada, he was one who would attract no unusual attention.

His face was smooth; his hair, cut short, was dark, and he had a good, almost stalwart, figure that showed to advantage in the garb he wore.

He had witnessed the match, and was among the first to look into Broncho Buck's face. It might have been noticed by some, that when the champion jumper died, his eyes were fixed on the face of this man, but the Yellow Jacket pards were, for the most part, too excited to see anything of this kind.

The man with the red beard, the "strawberry blonde," as the pards of Yellow Jacket called him, was voted to have forfeited his money by his disappearance, and the suggestion that the fund be applied to the bar was unanimously approved amid much hilarity.

Nobody ever expected to see the better again. He had come to Yellow Jacket several weeks before in company with a very beautiful, but sad-faced young woman, and when some of the Nevada pards hinted that something was wrong, he had taken his departure without any great display of ceremony.

The stake-holder was invited to the front, and exhibited a willingness to get rid of the money in his hands.

"If the blonde comes back, we'll tell 'im that stakes not called for pass into the general fund of Yaller Jacket!" laughed one of the group. "But he'll not show up. He went off like a rocket after the croak o' the Silver Decker's dropper, just as if he didn't want ter be around whar that man war."

A smile came and played on the face of the smooth-faced man when he heard this remark.

"Walk up, gents!" called the burly stakeholder to the men who were at the little tables scattered throughout the room. "The general fund has received a liquor legacy. Waltz forward ter the bar and select yer p'izen."

Several games were interrupted, and the players came forward, eager to get a "free blow" on money which had never burned their pockets.

"Ho! Don't touch a drop o' that liquor!" suddenly cried the stakeholder. "By the eternal years! the strawberry blonde has come back!"

The last sentence, though spoken in a lowered voice, had been heard by all.

The "blonde" had come back, sure enough, for he stood just inside the door he had opened, his reddish beard hiding one-half of his shirt-front, and a quantity of hair of the same color visible under the overarching brim of his dark gray hat.

The eyes of the smooth-faced man became at once fastened upon him.

"Just in time, captain!" shouted the stakeholder. "Yer dust war about ter pass inter ther gin'ral fund."

"My dust?" echoed the stranger, coming forward. "Wasn't my money given up to the person I bet with?"

"Not by a long shot! Broncho Buck fell beyond the marks o' ther Injun's heel, and I refused ter surrender ther stake."

"The jumper was killed, then?"

"I should whisper. That Colorado killer never misses, they say."

"Who says so?" demanded the big blonde, with a visible start.

"Oh, common report," was the answer. "You went off rather sudden arter the finish."

"A little sudden, perhaps," replied the stranger, with a smile as he moved through a living aisle to the counter, where he turned on the crowd. "We'll let the stake belong to the general fund. What will you take, gentlemen?"

It need not be said that a shout greeted this

sample of liberality. The man with the red beard was already a hero.

No one noticed the silent watcher draw back. His eyes saw only the big stranger, and there was in their depths a gleam of long pent-up triumph.

"You're a fool for coming back here, Paul Demidoff," were his thoughts, amid the rough hilarity that followed the invitation. "You came here some time ago with Medora. You are lingering here for some purpose. By Jupiter! you have covered your trail well. Did you learn these arts in the service of the czar? Or have you acquired them since your first American crime? If Mortimer could see me here how his eyes would sparkle; and how Thurston's heart would leap for joy if he knew that I have found the Russian scorpion!"

The smooth face and the colored eyebrows, with a complete change of garb, had completely altered Captain Coldgrip's appearance.

He would have courted the strictest scrutiny by the Russian who masqueraded in the reddish beard, but whose voice and eyes were traitors to his cause.

He had witnessed the death of the man he had corrupted with his money, and it was the fear of being seen and recognized by Mark Million, that had driven him so soon from Yellow Jacket.

"I am included in this invitation," concluded Captain Coldgrip, as he turned to the counter, where the bottle was already passing from hand to hand.

Colonel Redpath was talking rapidly and in a loud voice to those nearest him. He was bitter in his denunciations of Captain Million's course.

He ought to be followed and treated to summary vengeance. His story that Broncho Buck had been killed for a treason, was all sham. Colonel Redpath affected to believe that the jumper's death was a cold-blooded murder by a man who had money up on Lean Wolf, the Comanche.

"By the way, whar's yer pardner, colonel?" broke in a rough mountaineer between the fast drinks.

"My partner?"

"The beautiful creature you showed up with hyer when you first saw Yaller Jacket."

The Russian broke into a coarse laugh.

"Oh, my niece, you mean?" he exclaimed. "I shipped her to 'Frisco, where she really belonged, but I hadn't enough o' the gold country, you see."

"A lie from the bottom of his heart!" muttered the Atlantic detective, who had not lost a syllable of the reply. "Medora Thurston is not near the capital of the gold coast. You can't hoodwink Claude Coldgrip with a lie like that, colonel."

"She was a real daisy," suddenly continued the Yellow Jacket pard. "What did you call her, colonel?"

"Lois," was the unhesitating response.

"Wasn't her name Medora?"

Colonel Redpath started as if a bomb had been exploded in the room.

Captain Coldgrip stood self-possessed and firm.

"Who said that?" suddenly asked the Russian.

"I did," was the answer, and a man stepped forward with several cards dropping from his hand. "You may call your niece Lois, Colonel Redpath, but I call the girl Medora. Confound you, you left me to hold the bag at Silver Deck!"

The Russian's eyes seemed ready to leave his head.

"I guess you know me now," continued the man, drawing still nearer. "I am Cyclone, once the man who helped you when you needed help. But when you saw you could play a good card at Silver Deck, you did so, and left me to get away as best I could. By Jupiter, it was a mean, dirty trick; the work of a man who ought to be now whar the dogs couldn't bite him!"

The suddenly resurrected sport of Silver Deck stood before the Russian, with his prominent figure drawn proudly up, and his big hands clinched in anger.

"No fighting hyer, gents!" cried the man behind the bar.

"Let the liar step outside!" roared Cyclone, coloring. "His beard is as false as the heart under the steel vest he wears. Step outside, Count Paul!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A HOT IRON COOLS.

As a matter of course, the denizens of Yellow Jack t were thrown into a state of astonishment by this change of scene.

"He'll pretend, when he talks, that he doesn't know me; see if he doesn't," continued Cyclone, appealing to the crowd, as he covered Colonel Redpath with his finger. "If he wants me to read his life under two flags, let him deny that he knows me. The girl wasn't Medora, eh, count?" and the Silver Decker leaned toward the Russian with a grin.

The look of rage which had settled on Colonel Redpath's face slowly gave way to one of conciliation.

He saw that Cyclone knew him beyond peradventure, and that if he further angered his old

partner there would be an *expose* not at all agreeable just then.

He had recognized Cyclone the moment he saw him, and that was when the sport had corrected him by calling the girl in question Medora.

"Don't go off the handle in that manner," the Russian said. "I did not know you when you first came up, but now I see an old face. Yes, Lois is sometimes called Medora, if you will have it so. We won't fight over anything, Cyclone. Ha! ha! by Jove! I'm glad I've met you!"

The once citizen of Silver Deck looked suspiciously at the hand Colonel Redpath extended.

"Do I want to make up with him after swearing revenge?" Cyclone asked himself. "He left me to hold the sack when he executed his famous swoop at Silver Deck. Won't he do it again? Well, mebbe I had better for the present." And the next moment Cyclone took the hand waiting for him.

Captain Coldgrip saw the grip, and smiled.

"A patched up peace. Anybody can see that," he thought. "I did not expect to find in Yellow Jacket the man who shot through my hat-rim at Silver Deck. Cyclone has been migratory ever since. I've seen his tracks several times since leaving the Colorado camp, but here is the man himself. Ah! Cyclone, ere long I'll recall a little event to your recollection."

Cyclone already stood at the counter alongside the stalwart Russian, his fingers encircling a liquor glass while he listened to the buzz of voices around him.

Did he know that he was covertly eyed by Colonel Redpath, whose expression told that he wished him (Cyclone) a thousand miles from him at that hour?

Some of the bronzed spectators looked disappointed at the result of the meeting.

Cyclone's onset gave promises of a breezy time with the resolver, but the giant with the red beard had quietly pocketed the charges, and was already on good terms with the impulsive sport.

Between the potations that followed the encounter, the jumping match and its tragical ending were freely discussed. Captain Coldgrip took no part in the talk, but his neutral position enabled him to hear everything.

When Colonel Redpath, after his last bumper to the pards of Yellow Jacket, announced his intention of re-irring, he received a pressing invitation to come again, whether a jumping bout was on the tapis or not.

He assured the pards that he would visit the camp again, and then, with an interchange of "good-nights," he withdrew, followed by Cyclone, of Silver Deck.

"What did you make that onset for?" exclaimed the Russian with fire in his eyes, as he wheeled upon Cyclone a few yards beyond the threshold of the ranch.

"What did you leave me in the lurch for?" was the instant rejoinder.

"I saw my opportunity. I had the bird delivered suddenly into my hands."

"By the man who dropped the trigger? You saw it, count. Natty Nick, alias Broncho Buck, gave you the secret."

"I had to pay for it," smiled the Russian ferret. "And I paid his own price, too. When did you strike Yellow Jacket?"

"A month ago."

"Been here ever since?"

"Yes."

"You did not quit Silver Deck immediately after my swoop?"

"A few hours later."

"What did the Atlantic ferret do?"

"He swore before the whole crowd to restore Medora to her father."

Paul Demidoff laughed.

"Well?"

"He left that same night," responded Cyclone.

"What of him since? Have you any news of Captain Coldgrip?"

"I wasn't hunting him up. I don't want to see a man who would kill me on sight for the worst pistol blunder I ever made. Claude Coldgrip can go to Satan for all I care! When I hunt him up, count, the moon will drop from the skies above us like a cake of ice. No; don't expect me to tell you anything about the movements of the New York spotter. I'm taking care of number one just now, and number one is the welfare of Cyclone."

"He isn't the invincible sleuth they have made him out!" exclaimed the Russian, with a sneer.

"You have Medora yet?"

"I have Lois," answered Demidoff, with a peculiar smile.

"Oh, that is the racket, is it? Lois, your niece! She isn't in 'Frisco so much as you tried to make the Yellow Jackets believe?"

The Russian gave Cyclone a look which did not have to be followed with a verbal answer.

"You are going to remain here, I presume?" suddenly continued Colonel Redpath.

"I don't know. I'm kinder tired o' Yaller Jacket," drawled Cyclone. "Are you Colonel Redpath yet?"

"Not any, Cyclone!" grinned the Russian.

"I thought not. New scenes make new names. I'm Cyclone though, because I've got no prize to get away with and," in a lowered voice, "with no Captain Coldgrip to look after my welfare. Colonel, I wasn't very lucky to-day. That rascally shot by Mark Million, may his Satanic Majesty take him! left me in the lurch, as my stakeholder refused to pay back my dust."

"I understand you," said the Russian promptly. "I will help you to the best of my ability; but, Cyclone, by Jove! you don't want to show your teeth any more as you did to-night."

"It was a rush o' blood to the brain," replied the sport in a mock apologetic tone.

"Which is sometimes followed by a flow of blood from the heart!" was the response, for the Russian believed he could now talk plainly to Cyclone. "Here is something to bank on. It won't make a nabob of you, Cyclone, but many a man well off to-day in this land has started on less."

At the same time the right hand of the Russian came out from beneath his coat, and Cyclone's fingers clutched the little packet it extended.

"Any news of Coral?" asked Colonel Redpath, as he delivered the package.

"I was about to mention her."

"Where is she?"

"That is difficult to say just now. Mark Million exiled her from Silver Deck. She came South. Once or twice since I have heard of a woman who reminds me of her, but it could not have been my wife. Two weeks ago at the jumping match before this a woman came to Yellow Jacket, and left five hundred dollars to be bet on Natty Nick. She won the stakes and they're still waiting for her. That woman nearly answers Coral's description. She was seen by Tucson Tony, in whose hands she left the money. I've been staying here, hoping she'd come back."

Colonel Redpath gave Cyclone a searching look.

"You don't intend to go back to Coral, do you?" he asked.

"No. I want to see her. If she is striking it rich, I might get a share in a bonanza, for, although we're no longer man and wife, colonel, Coral's got a warm place in her heart for me."

"Not for me, though," smiled the Russian.

"Why should she have?" cried Cyclone.

"It wasn't my fault," answered Colonel Redpath.

"Tell her that! Hunt Coral up and say to her that it wasn't your fault. As brave as I am, were I in your shoes, I wouldn't do it for a cool ten thousand! Not your fault, Count Paul? When they took her from bed that night you were told that she was in danger, yet you shook your head and let 'em go on. Not your fault? Well, mebbe not; but if Coral is living there is one woman who will hold you accountable for that night's work in far-off Russia!"

"Let her do it, if it gives her joy, but let her keep her distance!" grated the Russian.

"You don't want to be interfered with now, do you?" laughed Cyclone. "When a man has to keep his eyes open for Captain Coldgrip, he finds it keeps him busy. What! are you going away, count?"

"I'm going now. I came back to see what had followed the killing of Broncho Buck. These men won't follow Mark Million."

"I guess not. They'll train somebody as a new champion, for Yellow Jacket must keep up her jumping-matches which have made the town. I'll wait awhile for the woman to come for her winnings. It may be Coral."

Colonel Redpath touched Cyclone's arm.

"If she comes within a week, I'd like to know who she is," he said.

"What will you be?"

The Russian was silent for a moment.

"Just across the line is San Pedro," he replied at length.

"I've been thar," remarked Cyclone.

"It isn't a long ride on a good horse. A message left with Dark Donald will reach me; but it has to come inside of ten days."

"I will recollect. If the woman is Coral, you want to know it, eh?"

"I do."

"If she be another, no message need be carried!"

"That is it. Now, Cyclone, keep your eyes open. The big hand is yet mine, and it will remain so to the close. I presume my swoop was a thunderbolt to Silver Deck. Did they expect I had come from the czar's dominions to play the lamb in America? Why, the training I had over there is enough to let me beat the best ferrets they have in this country. Now, Cyclone, we understand one another. There's no war between us. Heavens! what a land this is to hide in!" And a laugh rippled over the bearded lips of the Muscovite giant.

Colonel Redpath turned from the man before him and went toward the horse which had brought him back from the mountains to which he had fled to escape Mark Million's eyes.

"He's afraid of Coral," concluded Cyclone, who watched him disappear. "He lies when he says he was not to blame for what happened one

night in St. Petersburg. I'd like to see him tell Coral that if there was a knife, or a revolver within her reach. The time may come yet; but let him go now. If no message is delivered to him at San Pedro within ten days, he will not be found. I know what that means, Count Paul Demidoff. I guess I know what that means!"

The Russian had already disappeared, and Cyclone went back to the Nevada ranch.

The men who saw him enter had forgotten his brief dispute with Colonel Redpath.

He went to one of the tables and resumed the game he had given up to face the evil genius of Medora Thurston's life, and in a little while he was absorbed in the play for fortune's favors.

Nobody had noticed that the smooth-faced stranger, whom we know was Captain Coldgrip, was no longer in the place.

His coming and going had excited no comment, but the time was very near when one of the most prominent actors in our Far West drama was to learn that the invincible sleuth had been to Yellow Jacket.

And that person was at that moment riding over a mountain trail, congratulating himself on possessing what he called a "big hand."

CHAPTER XX.

AT THE CANYON'S MOUTH.

It is not within the scope of our pages for us to go back and trace Captain Coldgrip's movements from the date of his leaving Silver Deck to the moment of his appearance in Yellow Jacket.

It can be said here that the Atlantic sleuth had not been idle. Colonel Redpath, as we may still call the Russian Scorpion, was a man hard to match, and more than once during the interval of sixty days, Captain Coldgrip had been forced to admit this.

Here and there, during the hunt, he caught a glimpse of the Russian's trail, only to lose it for a time as completely as if the palace spy had vanished in air.

Once the New York detective had gone to San Francisco, but he was soon back in the mountains after his old prey.

In the city he found the young man Mortimer occupying rooms in one of the large hotels.

Mortimer was impatient and restless, and when he heard from Coldgrip's lips that Colonel Redpath had not been found, his countenance fell and he trembled.

"I will not be answerable for what happens if the monster comes to 'Frisco," he ejaculated, sending the words through his teeth. "I know the man now, and I am confident that no disguise can deceive me. You may go back and hunt him among the gold-camps and the mountains, Captain Coldgrip; but the eyes of Mortimer will watch for him here."

It was not long after the detective's return from Mortimer that he found his prey at the bar of Yellow Jacket's best ranch.

Captain Coldgrip could have stepped forward and covered his man there, but the safety of the exile's daughter held him back. The secret of Medora Thurston's whereabouts was locked in Colonel Redpath's bosom, and he knew that if suddenly cornered in Yellow Jacket, the merciless wretch might seal his lips, and lose the girl to the world forever.

Need it be said that when the Russian left the Nevada camp, he had at his heels the spotter of the Atlantic coast?

Coldgrip was content to leave Cyclone behind, although he longed to clutch his attempted murderer, and to tell him that the bullet through the hat was the greatest and most fatal mistake of his life. But that time would come, thought the Atlantic sleuth as he rode from Yellow Jacket, his face turned toward the California boundary.

For a long time Colonel Redpath was in no hurry.

The night was pleasant and the stars that studded the vault of azure showed him the rather broad trail that wound among the hills like the trail of a wounded snake.

"If he intends to make San Pedro, I can beat him to the nest," exclaimed Captain Coldgrip. "There are no camps on this trail between here and the border town, and Colonel Redpath is not familiar enough with the country to keep up an establishment in the mountains. Shall it be the short cut to San Pedro?"

The sleuth had reached an opening in the mountains. It would lead him from the main trail and would, in time, land him in San Pedro, some hours in advance of the man pushing ahead, provided the Russian's destination was the line camp.

"Here goes for San Pedro!" decided Captain Coldgrip, guiding his horse into the new road. "If Colonel Redpath does not turn up there to accommodate me, I will go back to the old trail and hunt him up."

An hour later Coldgrip was well along toward San Pedro, but all at once in the center of a canyon through which the trail ran he drew rein and turned in the saddle.

"Somebody else going to San Pedro, eh?" he laughed while he listened with his horse whose pointed ears were erect. "Has the tiger turned on his hunter? Who told you about this near cut

out of Nevada, colonel? By my life! you're a cunning fellow!"

The canyon was one that kept echoes well. Far above the solitary trailer rose perpendicular walls, dotted here and there with vines that clung to the stones like drowning men to sea-drenched rock.

But for the unmistakable sounds of an approaching horse, Coldgrip might have heard his own heart.

There was now a full moon in the sky. It silvered the right hand wall of the canyon, showing it to the top; the other side was cast in darkness.

Suddenly the New York detective drew his horse over to the shaded side.

"Steady now!" he whispered, stroking the animal's neck. "Let silence be the word. I did not expect to catch anything between Yellow Jack and San Pedro; but we will call fish everything that comes into our net."

The horse seemed to understand the trailer, for he hugged the wall, and, with his master, waited for the person coming down the long canyon.

Lying along the detective's limb was something held firmly in his right hand.

A revolver was ready to cover the Russian Scorpion, or to be lifted in defense, should the Muscovite giant spy the man waiting for him in the shadows.

On, on came the unseen steed.

The canyon was the longest one on the short route, and, at some places, the bed was so rough that speed was necessarily slow.

For all this Captain Coldgrip did not show signs of impatience.

He had plenty of time before him, and he knew that the rider in the canyon was sure to come up if he only kept on.

All at once the American sleuth moved the slightest.

The outlines of the horse were visible where the moonlight lay like a silver veil.

Now for the rider!

Next moment the sharp eyes of the detective saw the horse entire.

"An empty saddle!" he exclaimed. "By Jove! what does this mean?"

The horse without a rider was now directly opposite his position, and had stopped as if he had discovered by instinct the proximity of another steed.

Coldgrip rode forward, and the next minute his hand was at the bridle of the strange horse.

He looked up the canyon, then turned his attention to the steed.

"This horse was following me because he heard the sound of my own animal's hoofs," inferred the detective. "Where did he lose his rider, and why? He was not carrying Colonel Redpath, because the Russian takes a larger saddle. I'm going back to see."

Captain Coldgrip wheeled his steed toward the northern end of the canyon, or the one toward Yellow Jacket.

The strange horse imitated the movement and placed himself alongside.

"Am I to go back to the camp?" smiled the sleuth. "I wonder if this horse is an ally of Colonel Redpath's?"

He saw the walls of the canyon grow less steep as he approached the mouth. In a little while he would be on the main trail again.

"Halt!" suddenly rung out a voice. "I'll take my horse, if you please!"

At the same moment Coldgrip saw the speaker—a woman in the moonlight, with a cocked revolver leveled at his breast.

"Your horse?" asked the detective, leaning forward, and peering into the face which was dark but illuminated by a pair of glittering eyes.

"It is nobody else's," was the answer, and the speaker came forward. "He threw me here awhile ago; got frightened at a shadow, and I lay stunned and unable to move till I heard him coming back. Ah! the rascal needs the spur for an hour! He's made me lose valuable time."

Captain Coldgrip had already surrendered the horse, and the woman touched the saddle with the ease of a practiced equestrienne.

"I ought to know you," she remarked, looking into the sleuth's face. "Did I thank you for bringing my horse back?"

"Never mind that," answered Coldgrip. "I was anxious to see who rode this horse. I have been paid for my trouble."

A smile came to the woman's face and lingered there.

"Were you going South?" she asked.

"I was."

"To San Pedro? Never mind! Your business must not concern me. If you came from the North, you may know something about the jumping-match at Yellow Jacket."

"It is over."

"Of course. Who won the big prize—I mean, who beat the champion?"

"It was a queer ending," smiled Captain Coldgrip, while he watched the woman's face attentively. "Broncho Buck beat Lean Wolf the Comanche, but he did it by falling dead three inches beyond the marks of the Indian's heels."

"Dead!" cried the woman, recoiling in her

saddle. "Broncho Buck dead on the jumping-ground?"

The detective nodded.

"It wasn't so very remarkable," he replied. "A man is apt to fall dead when hit by a bullet between the eyes."

"Heavens! who served Broncho Buck that trick?"

"A man—a stranger, called Mark Million."

An exclamation of wonder came from the woman's throat.

"Mark Million?" she echoed. "He followed him, then! He must have known who Broncho was."

"Well, who was Broncho?"

"Not very many people knew," was the reply. "I did, and that is why I left money on him in Yellow Jacket on the eve of the other match. I used to see him jump when he was the dandy of Silver Deck."

"Then you are Coral?"

Again the woman drew back, and her hands tightened on the rein; but the darting fingers of the tireless sleuth were at her wrist.

"Don't try to deny anything, please," he went on. "Your admission establishes your identity beyond all denial. You are Coral, the exile of Silver Deck."

"What if I am?" cried the woman. "I have a right to the freedom of this country."

"Undoubtedly you have. I will be the last man to curtail your liberty; but you need not fight shy of me because my business is to find the guilty and to drag them to justice."

"My God! I know you now!" exclaimed the woman. "You came to Silver Deck about the time the hand of Mark Million guided me into exile. You are the famous Captain Coldgrip, and, if report does not lie, the ally of Colonel Redpath of infamous memory."

"Still the old charge!" laughed Coldgrip. "I think I will be able to clear my skirts of the stain one of these days."

"Is it false, then?" and Coral's figure bent forward until her eyes glistened almost against the sleuth's face. "You are not his ally? You have no connection with Count Demidoff, who bought Silver Deck's secret from Natty Nick? You don't serve for his gold? Thank heaven for that, Captain Coldgrip!"

"When we meet, Colonel Redpath will not claim that I am his employee," was the reply.

"You must find him before I do!" cried Coral.

"Do you want him?"

"Do—I—want—him?" repeated the woman. "I live in hopes of finding this man who has a habit of sending people branded to the grave! If I had no cravings of revenge to satisfy, I would not be here among the mountains of America. Now I find his trail, now I lose it. Here he appears in one role, there in another. When Mark Million sent me into exile because he was afraid I would not keep the secret which Silver Deck was guarding at the time, he did not expect that I would lie in wait for the czar's favorite. Do I want to find him, Claude Coldgrip! Ha! ha! If you know where he is, and want him for yourself, you don't want to tell Coral, the avenger of her own wrongs."

"My trails are my own, woman," laughed the detective. "If you find Colonel Redpath before I do, strike; but if I can, I will check your avenging blade, for there is an American crime which calls for the rascal's blood."

"Two crimes, eh?" cried Coral. "No, there are four recorded against him—two in Russia, and two under the Stars and Stripes. He will not hesitate to turn on us, Captain Coldgrip. Wherever he goes he corrupts somebody. He made a traitor of Natty Nick, shot by Captain Mark at the jumping-match, as you have told me. He has spies and allies in San Pedro."

"Who are they?"

"Are you bound for San Pedro?"

"I may see the place."

"Then, beware of Dark Donald! He will laugh in your face while he unsheathes a knife under his coat. May the hand of heaven fell this last ally of the Russian ferret. If I fail, it will be because of Donald the Dark!" and Coral looked away and clinched her hands.

CHAPTER XXI.

LADY CYCLONE'S WARNING.

CAPTAIN COLDGRIP could not keep his eyes off the woman whose features, strikingly handsome as he had seen them in the moonlight, were distorted by a sudden spasm of pain.

This was Coral, the once Queen of Silver Deck, Cyclone's late wife, and Mark Million's exile.

One of her last sentences had told the secret of her bitter hatred of Colonel Redpath, the Russian sleuth.

Was she branded? Had her fair skin been touched by the iron which leaves a mark which one carries to one's grave?

As the detective looked at her with her hands clinched after her mention of Dark Donald's name, he saw her bosom rise and fall tumultuously under some powerful emotion, and, settling back in his saddle, he waited for her to become calm.

"You—are—going to San Pedro," she said,

turning upon him, and catching her breath between her words. "I say to you beware of the dog, and 'the dog' is Donald the Dark!"

Then a smile played over her lips as they trembled, and she threw a glance toward Yellow Jacket.

"Is Cyclone up there?" she suddenly asked.

"He is there," replied the detective.

"Waiting for me to come back, eh?"

"I do not know."

"I'll go up and see Cyclone; afterward you're liable to find me at San Pedro, and elsewhere. Do you want me to appear in this drama, Captain Coldgrip? I might baffle you: I might even send you back to your haunts by the Atlantic, empty-handed."

"The stage can accommodate all the actors," smiled the sleuth.

"Thanks," responded Coral. "To San Pedro, then, Claude Coldgrip. I now know that you are not the Scorpion's ally. It is sleuth against sleuth, I see. Well, the Russian is a power. I have seen him at his best. Once he broke up the most determined league of Nihilists that ever infested the empire. How did he do it? At the risk of his life he became one of them. He stepped from the palace into the secret ranks of these terrible people. But first, he took a potion which seemed to transfer him into another man. The color of his skin changed, and he lost his old looks, but none of his fierceness, none of his cunning. One by one he ran the Nihilists down. Man after man was secretly apprehended, and disappeared. Some went to the mines for life, others never left St. Petersburg! When the last member was in his power, Paul Demidoff came back to his master, his old self once more."

"A few months after that the beauty of a young girl crossed his path. Then began the machinations which resulted in the Russian's coming to America. The father of the girl he sent to Siberia; the child herself—she was little better than a child then—escaped from the country. Ah! if that could have ended the drama all would have been well. But Paul Demidoff never stops short of his object. The father escaped from the mines and joined the daughter in hiding in France. The palace sleuth took the trail. With power and unlimited resources at his back, he crossed the sea; he scented the fugitives in this country, and it was once his boast that Captain Coldgrip was his hired sleuth-hound!"

Coral looked into the spotter's face as she paused, but he made no reply and she went on.

"I know not how he discovered that his pray was in hiding in Silver Deck. But keep anything from that villain if you can!" and Coral laughed lightly. "When I saw him in the camp I knew his mission. I would not have betrayed the exiles for the world; but Mark Million would not trust me. I have been Count Demidoff's tool. I have served the Palace Scorpion with the abject servitude of a serf. He has paid me in coin as infamous as the products of the devil's mint! Heaven help the monster if I find him. Why, I will strike him if I have to beat down your hands, Captain Coldgrip, so look out for Coral, or Lady Cyclone, when you think your victory complete! You don't know the injury he inflicted upon me, and my lips will never breathe it. But I keep you here. You want to find the trail that drew you from New York, heaven knows how many months ago. I would like to know something about the crime Colonel Redpath committed on these shores, but that is one of your secrets, I presume."

"I need not keep it so," replied Captain Coldgrip. "Let me say that the son of his victim bides his time in 'Frisco."

"The son of his victim?" repeated Coral. "Aha! then it was the highest crime on the calendar of infamy. It was murder!"

"It was murder of the most infamous sort," answered the detective. "I cannot forget that I was for a few days in this villain's employ. What a plausible tale he told me! He had been sent over by the czar to find a Nihilist and his daughter who had committed one of the highest crimes known in Russian law. Then came the startling deed that electrified New York one morning. An old man, rich, noble and living alone, lay dead in his mansion! His wealth was all around him, not a thing had been touched. The assassin had disappeared, and the detectives who took up the case told me when I returned to the city—I was away at the time—that there was no clew. The victim's only child, a young man away at college, came home, and from the house straight to me. "My father's murderer for my fortune!" he cried. I gave up my connection with Count Demidoff, but not for the fortune mentioned by the young man. I like a deep, mysterious case, and here was one."

"Thread by thread of the mystery I picked up, link by link I drew the chain of crime from the darkness that hid it. Out from the shadows of guilt as I proceeded, came the figure and the handiwork of the man who masqueraded at Silver Deck as Colonel Redpath. Then my hunt was a chase after him. I knew he was still on the trail of the exiles, and I suspected that he believed me in his employ. Step by step I tracked him nearly across the continent. As

you know, I found him at Silver Deck, and when I recovered from the dazing stroke of a bullet, he had swooped eagle-like upon the mine, and Medora Thurston, his guest across the sea, was in his power. You see, Coral, that I can't be driven from a trail," and the face of the New York detective was brightened by a smile. "You and I for him, I presume. Well, woman, you have cause to hate him, no doubt; so has the young man who watches in 'Frisco for the face of the destroying angel. Are you still determined to baffle me if you can? After what I have told you, will you step between me and Colonel Redpath in the hour of my victory?"

Coral looked steadily into the face of the detective for a few moments. Their eyes met.

"Go to the trail!" she suddenly exclaimed. "It is a strange story you have told me. I think you do not tell it often."

"You are the first person who has heard it since I left New York with this quest to urge me on. I would not have told you here if you were not Coral, or Lady Cyclone."

"Thanks again," smiled the woman. "Let me say good-night, Captain Coldgrip. You will find Dark Donald in San Pedro. As I have said, he is Paul Demidoff's new man, his last and best ally."

As Coral finished she drew her horse aside and looked down the canyon.

"When you enter San Pedro, if you take the short cut," she went on, "look to the right. If it be day, you will see a wiry man with a dark skin, clad in a Mexican jacket, with a sombrero that has a gold thread band. He will be leaning against the front of a house with a cigarette between his lips. If you strike the border town at night, enter the same house and you will find the same man standing against the counter smoking. He is Donald the Dark. You can't miss him, Captain Coldgrip, and if he suspects, he'll take care not to miss you. Ha, ha!"

The clatter of hoofs followed the clear ring of Coral's voice, and Captain Coldgrip saw her wave him a parting from some distance away.

Coral had gone to Yellow Jacket, and he could turn his face toward the unknown town and to unseen adventures.

"If she beats me, well and good!" ejaculated the detective. "When the time comes she will discover that her hands will not be strong enough to rob me of my victory."

A little while later a horse went once more down the canyon which formed a part of the journey to San Pedro.

This time the rider was not stopped by the sound of hoofs behind him, and as the silver crescent in the sky dropped toward the mountain-touched horizon, the steed swung into a delightful valley which ended at the gates of the border town.

Captain Coldgrip had been doubly armed by Coral's warning, supplemented by her rapid but minute sketch of Donald the Dark.

He saw the Russian's ally rise before him whenever he exerted his imagination, and long before he reached San Pedro he saw Donald smoking before the house on the right.

A good horse, urged on by an eager trailer like the American sleuth, covers a long distance in a short time.

The night waned and the new day came at last over the ridges of the east.

Captain Coldgrip, still in the saddle, was crossing the valley he had entered some time before.

Some distance ahead through the clear atmosphere he saw the roofs of a town that grew more distinct as he approached.

It was San Pedro.

The trail across the valley was well defined, and the Yankee sleuth kept it without difficulty.

"It is early—a little too early for Donald to enjoy his cigarette before the gambling palace. The sun is not up, but I have no place to halt where I can await Donald's pleasure; therefore, I must find the gentleman elsewhere than before the house."

Thus murmured Captain Coldgrip while he rode past the first shanties of the town. When he came to the plaza which the trail led to, he turned to the right.

The next moment a smile came to his face, then a little laugh parted his lips.

"The morning is not too early for Donald the Dark," he exclaimed. "Yonder he is, exactly as Coral photographed him; hat, jacket, banded boots, and cigarette!"

The New York ferret would have been surprised if he had not seen Donald, despite the early hour.

He was the only person visible on the plaza, and the white smoke, which he blew from his mouth, for a second at a time, hid his Mexicanish face.

Captain Coldgrip rode straight toward this man as if eager to encounter him as soon as possible.

"If I have to meet him, I want to fathom him before he suspects," ejaculated the detective.

"Coral fears him. To her he is the man who will baffle her if she is baffled at all. Why, he is no giant, and, from a distance, he looks as harmless as a kitten."

By this time the smoker before the house had

spied the new-comer. He took his cigarette complacently from his narrow mouth, and looked through a smoke rift at the American sleuth.

"A good-morning, sir," he exclaimed, touching his hat brim with several long fingers as Captain Coldgrip drew rein before him. "You've been beyond the valley, I see," and the small and dark eyes of Donald of San Pedro glanced swiftly at the mountain dust on the detective's boots.

"Yes, beyond the valley, as you say," smiled Captain Coldgrip. "Have you opened for the day?"

Donald the Dark nodded, threw back his hand and opened a door at his left.

The New York sleuth slid from the saddle, and passed into the long narrow room at one end of which was a bar at that moment without a customer.

Donald followed with the tread of a cat.

CHAPTER XXII.

A BLADE FLASHES.

"Who's your man, Donald?"

"The captain who came in by the valley this morning?"

"Yes."

Donald the Dark poised his hand above the little card-table at which he was seated with a solitary antagonist, and looked into the eyes that confronted him.

"He's a cat," he exclaimed, in a peculiar tone, raised a degree above a whisper.

"I don't understand you."

"Your head is very thick to-night, Raphael. Can't you see with the eyes that sparkle under your brows, when you have a drink or two of my best under your jacket? The new captain is a cat, I say—that is, he is after a rat, ho! ho! Is that clear?" and down came a trump with emphasis.

The speaker's opponent nodded.

"Where is the rat, Donald?" he asked.

"He has not found him," was the laughing rejoinder.

"Is he in San Pedro?"

Donald shook his head.

"Then the cat will move on without leaving any of his fur here."

"Don't be too sure of that, Raphael. He may leave his claws before he sees the last of San Pedro."

The conversation stopped here and the game went on.

It was the night after Captain Coldgrip's introduction to Dark Donald, and the two men just seen were the only tenants of an apartment over the saloon owned and run by the cigarette smoker of the border town.

As this keen-eyed individual had called the New York sleuth a cat, it was evident that his suspicions had been aroused. Since his arrival Captain Coldgrip had not been idle. He had installed himself in a hotel that fronted the plaza, and had represented himself as being a ranch-owner who was making his way home by easy stages.

A ranch-owner of Southern California was supposed to have money, and, with it, a passion for risking the same at the gaming-table. Nobody knew this better than Captain Coldgrip, and during the day he had indulged that passion just enough to keep up the role he had assumed for the present.

He had made a study of Donald the Dark, and had reached the conclusion that the man was all that Coral had described him.

Here and there, by adroit questioning, he picked up considerable information about the man.

"Donald, in the Western sense, 'ran' San Pedro."

He loved money, of which he was reputed to have an ample store, but there were mysterious hints that he loved certain dark work more.

If this was Colonel Redpath's last ally, he could not have chosen one more dangerous to the interests of his enemies. Donald of San Pedro could be deep, cunning and faithful; but, at the same time, there was treachery intrenched under his swarthy skin.

The detective's secret work in San Pedro gained him no glimpse of the Russian sleuth. Once he thought he was on the trail, but further investigation dissipated the belief, and he could fix no connection between Donald and the ferret of the empire.

It was time enough for Colonel Redpath to come to San Pedro, and come he would if the boss of the town was his ally.

He could afford to wait.

While Donald the Dark and his card antagonist were playing and talking over the ranch, the tireless sleuth occupied a seat on the porch, which extended the whole front of the hotel, and looked upon the fountain of old style playing in the center of the square or plaza.

San Pedro was not a live town at any time. It did not possess that motion which characterizes the mining-towns of the great West, for it had no mines at its doors.

Lying in the valley, which extended to the mountains, barely visible of a clear day, its life was sluggish when no quarrels broke the monotony.

Captain Coldgrip did not have the porch to

himself, for almost within reach of his hand sat a portly man seemingly asleep in a chair.

Once or twice the detective glanced at him and smiled. The face was full and almost round, showing signs of dissipation.

Once, however, he caught the man's eyes wide open and fixed upon him. There was no mistaking the espionage, and although the fat personage hastily closed them again, the sleuth had seen enough to satisfy him.

A rapid glance around told Captain Coldgrip that he was alone with the man, and the next moment, while the individual was counterfeiting sleep, he leaned toward him and touched his arm.

"What is it, sir?" asked the person, shaken up by the detective. "Do you want me? By Jove! I was asleep."

"Fast asleep!" smiled Captain Coldgrip. "I wanted to ask you who gave you fountain to San Pedro."

A ludicrous look crossed the rounded face, and the fat man seemed to see through the sleuth's excuse for disturbing him.

"I—I don't know, sir. I don't live here. I am Concho."

The name produced a strange effect on the New York spotter. He moved his chair a little closer to the man, and then looked searchingly into his face.

"You are not the Concho I once knew," he said.

"Don't you think I am? Look again. I've gained flesh since we parted, for you will pardon me if I say I think I know you."

A thrill ran through Captain Coldgrip's breast.

Recognition was the last thing he looked for in San Pedro.

The next moment he was diverted from his scrutiny of the face which Concho had presented for inspection, by the sound of hoofs.

"There's a man!" ejaculated the portly fellow, and the detective looked toward the fountain to see a man on horseback between the hotel and the spray.

But that was not all he saw.

San Pedro had a few modern conveniences not possessed by all California towns, and one was a large lamp with a polished reflector that was fastened to one of the columns of the porch. This lamp threw its light half-way across the plaza, and between the porch and the fountain it was quite strong.

The mounted man had ridden into the light, and when Captain Coldgrip looked up he saw him plainly from hat to spur.

It was Colonel Redpath!

At first the new-comer showed signs of riding straight up to the porch, but all at once he turned to the left and disappeared.

"Gone to Donald's!" smiled the fat man, looking into the sleuth's face. "He always seeks El Paradiso when he comes to San Pedro."

"Who is he?" asked Coldgrip.

"Major Mystery, the crowd calls him, for want of a better name."

"But that is not his name, Concho?"

"Concho? Ha! you have fixed me now," was the quick ejaculation.

"If you are the same Concho who got away one time when Mark Million left a certain gold town, I have fixed you."

The portly man grinned, and laid one of his chubby hands on the sleuth's arm.

"There was never but one Concho," he smiled, "and, if I'm not mistaken, never two Captain Coldgrips. Ho! don't you wish you had a memory like mine?"

"It is very good. But you were watching me while you pretended to be asleep."

"I could not help it. I've had my eyes on you nearly all day. I did not recognize you at first, but at last I got a grip, and then you rose before me as the man-hunter who once broke up our nest in the mountains. You don't want me now, I guess. I'd be rather hard to take with my three hundred pounds of flesh, eh, Captain Claude?"

"You are right, I don't want you, Concho; that is, I won't operate against you if you will lend me a hand."

"I see. You are on another trail," cried the old acquaintance. "What is it you want, captain?"

"How long have you been here?"

"All summer."

"And you know all the people?"

"All but the man who just rode across the plaza."

"Is this his haunt?"

"He goes and comes a good deal, but I guess he calls San Pedro home."

"Is he thick with Donald?"

Concho started and then let slip a light laugh. "Touch Donald and you startle Major Mystery, and vice versa. I don't get around much. I'm too big to move with ease; but I've seen enough to know that a link unites those two men."

"Where does the major stay when he is here?"

Concho gave Captain Coldgrip a significant look and settled back into his chair.

"What does the fool mean?" mentally ejaculated the detective.

"The plaza!" whispered Concho's lips with the slightest movement, and then he was to all appearances sound asleep in his chair, his mouth half-open, and his head on his arm.

Captain Coldgrip turned toward the plaza, but saw nothing.

The silver spray of the fountain danced and sparkled in the lamplight, and the giant leaves of the tropic water plants threw their shadows over the pool.

For several moments the New York sleuth watched the spot, but nothing rewarded him.

"I see nothing," he ejaculated, turning back to Concho.

"A man was among the foliage of the fountain. I saw him move. It was the worst man in San Pedro, too—Donald, the Dark!"

Again Captain Coldgrip turned his eyes upon the plaza.

"You won't see him; he is gone," whispered Concho. "You will find him at El Paradiso with the man who just rode across the square. I think I had better quit San Pedro. If Donald saw me talking to you, and he has the keenest eyes in the south, he will cross me out on the book he is said to carry next his heart."

Concho lifted his ponderous frame from the chair, and threw a frightened glance toward the fountain.

"You don't have to fly just because Donald has seen you," exclaimed Captain Coldgrip.

"I've got a little mine near San Luis Potosi, and I think it would be healthier there."

The Atlantic detective could not help smiling at the fear depicted in the tones and on the countenance of the man before him.

"How will you get out of town?" he asked.

"I'll empty my pockets at Pablo's feet. Pablo is the owner of some big horses, and one is strong enough to carry me. I am going, Captain. Don't fool with Donald. Gods! I wish I had never seen San Pedro. Good-night. Ah! I shall feel at ease when I see the little mine once more."

Coldgrip saw that it was useless to argue with the man who had been filled with fear by seeing the proprietor of El Paradiso among the tropic foliage at the fountain.

It was so soon after the disguised Russian's arrival.

Was it not suspicious?

When the sleuth left the hotel and walked boldly toward Dark Donald's place, the big man had retired to his room.

"That is the man!" suddenly said a sharp voice a few feet from the detective, and as the sleuth turned, something human in shape came bounding toward him like a tiger.

The street was dark at that particular point, but the glowing lights in the heavens showed Captain Coldgrip the gleaming eyes and agile figure of his assailant.

He had an instant to brace himself in, then he threw up his hands, and clutched the wrist above which something glittered like polished steel.

An oath followed the collision, and as the New York ferret wrenched the dagger from the rascal's hand, he looked into the flashing eyes of Donald the Dark!

CHAPTER XXIII.

A HARD NUT TO CRACK.

THE attack, swift and sudden, was like the leap of a tiger in lurking, and when Donald the Dark found himself in the power of the iron-handed detective, he showed his teeth in a most savage manner.

Not far away, outlined to the searching eye of the Atlantic sleuth, was seen a man who had watched the spring and its consequences.

Captain Coldgrip well knew who this man was; and, fully expecting a bullet from that direction, he adroitly held Donald before him as a shield.

"Let me go!" hissed the keeper of El Paradiso. "I see—the wrong man! Beg pardon, captain; the wrong man on my sacred honor!"

The ferret could not suppress a smile at this sudden change of front. The wrong man? He knew better than this. Donald the Dark had sprung at the very prey he had been watching, and the Russian's words, "That is the man!" still rung in the detective's ears.

"Rung the wrong man, am I?" he exclaimed, as the figure in the shadows drew back. "If you had not failed, Captain Donald, the right man would be lying dead at your feet. Is this a display of San Pedro tactics?"

"Deeply I implore your pardon. You are not the enemy I had sharpened my knife for—the fellow who broke my bank the other night by a secret trick."

The answer ended in a well-assumed whine, and while it lingered on Dark Donald's lips, the figure near the houses vanished.

"I'll let you go, but on one condition," replied Captain Coldgrip.

"Name it."

"You will tell what you know about the man who has just sneaked away."

Donald the Dark looked astonished.

"The man, captain?"

"Don't try to beat me with a look," smiled the detective. "I have played against eyes before to-night. The man who came to San Pedro on horseback awhile ago is the person I am talk-

ing about. He is Major Mystery, so-called; but, in other words, a Russian."

"Ho! you know a good deal about him, then!" cried the San Pedro sport. "Was Major Mystery here to-night?"

"Come!" and the cold hand of the American sleuth got a new grip and shook Donald till his yellow teeth chattered. "If you persist in lying about that man, when he gave the command for your assault not five minutes ago, I will proceed to play a hand that might open your eyes."

"This is no place," was the reply. "Down the street a piece is El Paradiso."

"Your den! I understand it all, Donald. Up the street on the plaza is the Valley Rose."

"To perdition with the hotel! I never enter it," grated the San Pedro sport. "I have a private room in El Paradiso."

"Thank you, Donald. I possess the same accommodations at the Valley Rose," laughed the detective.

Donald the Dark dropped his head for a moment.

"To the Valley Rose, then! Confound it! you want to drag me to the feet of my enemy."

Up to this moment Captain Coldgrip had held the wrist of the man with the deep-set serpent eyes. Now he dropped it, but leaned toward Donald as he resumed:

"I have mentioned the plaza hotel because I do not want to interview you in your own ranch, Donald. You will pardon me when I say that I know the ways of the citizens of these Southern California towns."

"They are good people!" grinned Donald. "They hate nobody but their enemies, and that is natural."

"The example I have just witnessed confirms that. Shall we go up to the Valley Rose, Captain Donald?"

"Yes."

Although, to all outward appearances, Donald of San Pedro had been disarmed by the detective, he was watched with the eye of a hawk by the man who turned back toward the hotel in front of the fountain.

"I must show this rascal that I am here to conquer," murmured the sleuth. "Colonel Redpath will not quit San Pedro until he hears the report Donald sees fit to deliver, and, if I can have my way, I'll help to make that very same report."

"Not by the porch, if you please, captain," said Donald, looking up into Captain Coldgrip's face as they touched the plaza. "There is a back entrance to the Valley Rose."

"Lead the way to it."

In less than five minutes after the start from the scene of the human panther's leap at the Atlantic ferret the two men passed through an arched gate into a garden and from thence into the hotel by a rear entrance.

Once in the corridor beyond the door, Captain Coldgrip got his bearings, and led Donald to the little room he had hired, a poorly furnished place, whose one window looked out upon the fountain playing in the lamplight.

A change had come over Dark Donald's face, and Coral's estimate of him came flashing across the detective's mind as he noted it.

Instead of the sullen, tigerish gleam in the depths of the San Pedroan's eyes, the sleuth saw a pleasant look there, as if the fellow was on the fringe of a laugh.

"How blind I was!" ejaculated Donald. "I see now that I rushed like a cyclone at the wrong man! Why, you are the gentleman who came from beyond the valley this morning and found me in front of my door. Nay, you don't look like San Gabriel Louis, the cheater for whom I was watching. Your pardon again, captain."

Captain Coldgrip saw through this palaver. Donald of San Pedro was hiding his claws for the present under some handy velvet, but his eyes told where the ends of the claws were to be seen.

"In the first place, was your companion waiting with you for San Gabriel Louis?" asked the detective.

"My—companion? Captain—"

"Let me spare you some words, Donald," interrupted Coldgrip. "Major Mystery and you are friends. When he comes to San Pedro he makes El Paradiso his headquarters. When he finds he has no use for a friend's assistance, he lets him slip. He would not help you to-night. If I had choked you in his presence, he would not have raised a hand in your behalf. After all, Captain Donald, the Russian, is a coward."

"Maybe he is. I have never seen him tried," smiled the San Pedro boss. "But did you fetch me to the place I never visit to tell me this?"

"No. I merely mentioned it to let you know that I don't like cowards like Major Mystery. Were I to open the door now, you would tell him about my opinion, eh, Donald?"

"Maybe I could not find him."

"Go down to El Paradiso—to the private room. Can't you see him there now, waiting impatiently for you, Donald?"

A smile showed itself at the corners of the San Pedroan's mouth.

"He may be there, captain," he admitted.

"Even in your private room?"

"Confound him, even there."

"You know that he is more than Major Mys-

tery. Come, Captain Donald. Though this is San Pedro, and you are called its head, this little room may hold your future."

Captain Coldgrip thought he saw the man's teeth meet over this threat. At any rate, the eyes caught fire.

"What is it worth?" suddenly asked Donald the Dark.

"Is it a question of money?" was the reply, as the detective gave the sport a searching look.

"It is for you to say."

At this the San Pedroan leaned back till he touched the wall, and waited like a shrewd bargain-maker for the next advance.

"You have the secret, then?" asked the detective.

"The secret, captain?"

"You know where the Russian prisoner is?"

There was a sudden start on the San Pedroan's part. He caught himself just an instant too late; the cool player in front of him had seen it.

"Has Major Mystery a prisoner?" he asked, assuming astonishment again.

"Has Captain Donald played watch and ally for him blindfolded? I did not come to San Pedro to find a fool. They don't call you that away from home, Donald."

The San Pedroan touched the brim of his hat cavalierly for the compliment, and took out a cigarette which he lighted for a smoke.

The coolness of this Southwest desperado provoked the New York spotter.

Was he trying to gain time for somebody? While he was holding him at bay with a sword of words, was the Russian ferret making off to new haunts with Medora, the beautiful prisoner?

"Once more," mentally exclaimed the detective. "If he attempts to baffle me I'll play a strong hand."

Then he looked into the eyes that laughed invitingly at him behind the curling smoke, and resumed:

"Is it worth a thousand, Captain Donald?"

"I am very poor. I have nothing to sell," was the reply.

The next moment Captain Coldgrip left his chair, and before the San Pedroan could lift a hand, he was once more in the Atlantic sleuth's grip.

"I will find out for myself!" cried the detective. "You are very poor to be the richest rascal in San Pedro. Oblige me by keeping quiet, Captain Donald. Your pedigree was read to me before I ever saw your face, and the reader did not miss it by a hair."

The proprietor of El Paradiso was jerked from his stool, and a moment later he lay across the little cot in one corner of the room, with the triumphant eyes of Captain Coldgrip gleaming above his face!

What followed is quickly told. In a minute, as it seemed, so rapidly did the man-hunter work, the king sport of San Pedro lay bound and helpless on the blankets.

He could look daggers at the American sleuth, which he did, but an effective gag in his mouth kept him from spitting out the venom that was almost choking him.

"You say you don't like the Valley Rose," smiled Captain Coldgrip. "That being the case, Donald, you are likely to enjoy its hospitality for some time. I may come back to release you, and I may not. This is one of the games that sometimes go against the child of fortune. Good-night!"

The last look the detective got from the man on the cab was one of intense hate, and meeting it with a smile of victory, he walked out, closing the door after him.

In the narrow weather-boarded corridor just beyond the threshold he came suddenly in contact with the massive figure of Concho.

"Merciful God, captain, where is Donald the Dark?" ejaculated the big miner, in gasps. "I saw you take him to your room. I—I— Great Caesar! let me get ten minutes the start of the tiger of San Pedro, and I won't let grass grow under my feet. I've hired Pablo to take me away. It isn't healthy here for Concho, and you'll find it mighty sickly for you if Donald and his pards get the upper hand."

"You shall have all the start you want. Get out of town if you can't stand the hunting eyes of Captain Donald who is very safe just now. A safe trip to San Luis Potosi, Concho," and the detective touched the big sport's hand and passed on.

Captain Coldgrip left the hotel by the rear door, silently and unobserved.

"I told Donald that the colonel was waiting for him at El Paradiso," he mentally ejaculated, as he put his hand under his coat and touched something which he had handled before. "I shall now see what sort of prophet I am. Ha! Colonel Redpath; when I set out on this trail I never thought it would reach to San Pedro."

He went straight to the famous ranch, and entered boldly.

At one end of the room and near the bar, was a door on which was painted the word—

"Private."

Captain Coldgrip walked forward, and put his hand on the latch.

"Now for it, my Russian wolf!" came through his teeth, and then opened the door.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE HUNTRESS IN YELLOW JACKET.

WE go back to Yellow Jacket, not for long, reader, but long enough to keep track of a character without whom our Western drama would lack some important scenes.

When Captain Coldgrip left Coral at the mouth of the long canyon, she rode toward Yellow Jacket to claim her winnings on the jumping match, and to encounter for the last time, she thought, the man who had been her husband.

The meeting with the detective had altered Coral's looks. A new and fierce desire now seemed to illumine her eyes, and her movements were restless even in the saddle.

"So the ferret of the czar blooded his hands after he touched these shores!" she exclaimed, recalling Captain Claude's story of the American crime. "I don't know but that I ought to let the New York sleuth have his way. He will avenge me when he reaches his victory. No! he can't do that!" and her eyes would flash again.

"Nobody can avenge me! I must do it myself! I told him to watch for me at the moment of triumph. When I think of Paul Demidoff, my blood burns, and a scorpion seems to sting me on the shoulder. A few minutes is all the time I want in Yellow Jacket; then back to the spot where something tells me I will meet the Muscovite once more."

With words of this sort chasing one another over her lips, Coral rode into the Nevada town, and slipped to the ground in front of the ranch where she expected to find her stakeholder, and probably Cyclone.

Her appearance in the place was greeted with several expressions of surprise, and a little man came toward her with a smile.

Coral recognized him at once as the stakeholder.

"I've got it safe for you, though Broncho Buck will never jump again!" exclaimed the diminutive sport. "You won five hundred on the match two weeks ago, and I put the whole pile up to-day."

"But Broncho Buck's death made the match a draw," remarked Coral.

"It did for some of the boys," grinned the stakeholder. "I bet the pile with an almond-eyed son of Confucius who war backin' the Comanche leaper, and when I privately clapped my dropper to the stakeholder's head an' looked daggers at China John, I got every dollar of the stakes."

The little man thrust his hand beneath his jacket and produced a heavy buckskin purse which made the eyes of some of the unfortunate betters snap.

"That's a clean two thousand for you," he went on extending the purse toward Coral whose countenance showed her astonishment. "My commission isn't a copper. It was worth a big percentage ter see the Celestial lose color when he saw my 'hand.'"

All this time a man was watching Coral from across the room.

He was partly shielded by the stalwart figure that stood between him and the woman; but he could see her plainly if she could not enjoy the same privilege.

Coral took the purse but opened it immediately and threw two eagles upon the counter.

"For the gentlemen of Yellow Jacket," she said with a smile to the dispenser of the liquors, and then a big fellow tossed his hat toward the ceiling and clothed his approbation in a wild yell.

"What a lift a part o' that would be for me!" ejaculated Cyclone, his gaze flitting from the buckskin purse to Coral and back again. "She hasn't showed any ill will toward me since we dissolved partnership. She might divide now, for what does she want with two thousand here? There can be no more bets on Natty Nick, and the Injun will never come back here to jump."

The woman drew back from the counter and watched the pards of Yellow Jacket push forward to accept the invitation implied in her remarks to the bartender.

In a little while Cyclone was left alone, a conspicuous figure at one of the card-strewn tables.

All at once the gaze of Coral fell upon him, and then their eyes met.

A moment later the exile of Silver Deck crossed the room and stood before the burly sport.

"You still linger here," she exclaimed. "Did you see the two sleuths who have just left?"

"No! I saw nobody suspicious!" was the reply, for Cyclone did not see fit to tell Coral about his meeting with Colonel Redpath.

"Where were your eyes?" laughed the woman. "They were here, at the fatal match. Captain Coldgrip isn't many miles away yet, and the other, the Russian Scorpion—he may be nearer still!"

Cyclone could not suppress a start at the intelligence that the New York spotter, whose life he had once attempted, had been within striking distance. Why had he not seen Captain Claude? And, as Coral had asked, where had his eyes been?

The hand concealed among the folds of the

woman's garments held the purse she had just received from her stakeholder, and when Cyclone cast his eyes downward and caught a glimpse of the treasure, he instantly lost all interest in everything else.

Although but a short time had elapsed since Colonel Redpath's departure, the money which Cyclone had received from him had vanished with a few unlucky turns of a card, and he was once more in a strait, and eager to return to the golden tiger.

"I want to see you," suddenly continued Coral, dropping her voice. "You are a citizen of Yellow Jacket, therefore you have a shanty."

Cyclone's eyes got a sudden glitter. "Of course I've got a shanty, but it's nothing like the old Katopkin palace," he replied with a grin.

"There! that will do!" cried Coral, flushing. "You don't want to torture me with the infamous past. Lead the way to your Nevada palace."

Cyclone had the woman at his side when he left the ranch much to the unexpressed astonishment of the pards who knew nothing about the relation that had once existed between the pair.

Beyond the door Coral took the bridle of the horse that waited for her, and followed Cyclone through the gold town to a small house, which they entered.

"I want a certain thing which you possess," began Coral. "It is not my intention to rob you. I am able to purchase what I want, and you, I am sure, will be willing to sell to me."

A strange look overspread Cyclone's face. "What is it, Coral?" he asked.

"The brand!" was the quick response. "You had it in your possession when you left Silver Deck and went to Leadville. I know you took it along, because I searched your shanty. I want it now."

"I thought you have enough of it already."

"I have a thousand times more of it than I want! But I must have the original. There, Cyclone, take the smiles of fortune, and give me the accursed thing!"

As Coral finished, the buckskin purse struck the table with a metallic sound that jingled pleasantly in the big sport's ears.

"The brand can do you no good," continued Coral. "I don't know why you ever brought it to this country. There was a time when you burned with vengeance against the czar's ferret, but all at once your oaths ceased, and when he came to Silver Deck, he won you over to himself again. I cannot stay here forever, Cyclone. Give me the brand and take the gold yonder."

Cyclone stepped forward and lifted the purse, all the while closely watched by the Russian's foe.

"There are no roubles in there," laughed Coral. "That purse contains none of the blood-money that cost Natty Nick his life. It is all American gold, Cyclone. And it is yours in exchange for the little plate of steel which you stole in Russia and carried across the sea."

The stalwart sport put down the purse, and turned slowly upon the woman.

"I think I know what you want with it," he said.

"You ought to be able to guess," was the quick answer.

"You can never accomplish your object, woman. You think that the St. Petersburg ferret has lost power since landing in America. Vain delusion, Coral. You forget that Captain Coldgrip is on his track, and if both men were here to-night, as you say, the New York sleuth has run his quarry down. Captain Claude will never let you use the piece of steel you want to buy of me."

"Captain Coldgrip has been warned!" ejaculated Coral. "He knows that I am a tigress on the path of revenge. Give me the brand and let the future take care of itself."

"If you insist it shall be yours."

"I demand it!"

Cyclone turned away, and unlocked a very rude cupboard in one corner of the shanty.

Thrusting one of his hands into the place, he drew forth a flat package with which he came back to the woman waiting breathlessly for him.

"There may be death in that for you," he said as he handed the packet to Coral whose hand closed eagerly upon it.

"There is vengeance in this for Paul Demidoff's last Russian victim. Are you sure this is the identical brand, Cyclone?"

"Look and see," came over the sport's lips.

Coral stepped to the table and began to remove the wrappings of buckskin and paper that hid the object she had secured.

"It is the same!" she suddenly cried, starting back as the last wrapper fell off, exposing a flat bit of steel four inches square, and curiously engraved, and cut through in several places.

"Heavens! how my shoulder burns while I look at the horrid thing!" she went on, wheeling upon Cyclone who was watching her with a look between pity and a smile.

"You have never inhaled the odor of your burning flesh. You have never felt the iron that marks you for life and makes the past a living hell. I felt this thing, fresh from a

Russian furnace, on my person, and after I had helped the palace spy to victory! Was there ever infamy deeper and darker than this, Cyclone?"

"It was the torture of devils," cried the sport.

"And when a word from him would have saved me!" exclaimed Coral. "Ah! let him look out! I have the brand which his slaves pressed against my flesh. The mountains of America will furnish me with fire, and the flesh of the Russian Scorpion may wither under the touch of red hot steel."

Cyclone had never seen a woman so madly beautiful before.

"Be careful!" he cried. "Paul Demidoff, the born of sleuth of the palace, is by no means powerless here."

"It is the power which I know he possesses that will make me cautious, and quick to strike."

"He is able to keep a hundred spies at his heels. You must not forget that the bird he took from the underground cage of Silver Deck, he keeps yet, despite the shrewdness of Captain Coldgrip, the hunt by Mark Million, and the watchfulness of Mortimer, who hopes to meet the count in 'Frisco.'"

"I forget nothing, Cyclone," ejaculated Coral. "If you are still his ally, serve him. Tell him that I am on his trail, and add that the brand is in my hands. That purse and its contents are yours. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes." And as Coral moved toward the door Cyclone took a quick step after her.

"After you have found him, if you ever do, what is to become of you?" he inquired.

"I care nothing for life after that!" was the reply. "It is enough for me to plan for the day of retribution. I want to feel that merciless monster in my hands. I want to see the steel brand hiss and sputter in his face. After that triumph, oblivion!"

And Coral broke from Cyclone's fingers and reached her horse as he touched the shanty's threshold.

As if she feared detention when she did not want to be detained, Coral caught the lines, vaulted easily into the saddle, and waved her hand at the astonished sport.

"If we never meet again, Cyclone, farewell!" she exclaimed. "We have been happy, and in Russia, too!"

There was a touch of spurs, the horse lifted his head, and bounded away.

"What shall I do?" exclaimed Cyclone. "I promised to get a message to San Pedro if the woman who had money up on Broncho Buck was Coral. Yonder she goes, with her blood on fire, and eager to restore the brand to its owner. Ought I to warn the count? He may be a goldmine for me in the future, and the woman—she can never enrich me another cent!"

CHAPTER XXV.

CAPTAIN CLAUDE STARTLED.

WHEN Captain Coldgrip opened the door of Dark Donald's private room in El Paradiso, he was prepared to meet the Russian himself.

So confident was he of the presence of the foreign sleuth in the chamber, that a disappointment would be sure to startle him.

The room was dimly lighted, but there was light enough to show the captain the figure of a man in an old-fashioned arm-chair at the further end.

He walked forward briskly, his eyes on the person, and his hand at the butt of a revolver in his hidden belt.

"At last, colonel!" exclaimed the New York spotter, halting within three feet of the man in the chair. "Lost in Silver Deck, found in San Pedro! My God! it is another man!"

It was a convulsive movement by the person before him that told Captain Coldgrip that he had not addressed his rival of the wild West trail.

The next moment the sleuth bounded forward, his pistol hand dropped at his side, and he was bending over the ashen face that stared vacantly at the ceiling.

"It is Mortimer, whom I left in 'Frisco!" continued the detective. "What lured him from there to the clutches of the Russian ferret? Mortimer! Mortimer! when and how was this dark work done?"

Such was the horrid discovery made by the Atlantic detective in the little room next to Dark Donald's bar.

It overcame him. For a moment he could hardly credit the evidences of sight.

But Mortimer was before him, the son of Colonel Redpath's American victim, and the youth who had inaugurated the chase across the continent.

Captain Coldgrip first saw that the young man was not dead.

Then he went back to the door by which he had entered the place, and quietly bolted it.

"I'll get at the mystery if he's not past talking," he exclaimed, returning to the youth. "Of course, this is the Muscovite's work; but who lured Mortimer hither? That is what I want to know."

Once more he bent over the occupant of the chair, but now he was using certain simple

means of restoration. After awhile a gleam of hope came back to the young man's eyes, his color followed, and then a few incoherent words.

Mortimer started when he recognized the man who stood beside his chair.

"Where—is—the—Russian—viper?" he then gasped.

"Where we will surely find him," came in reply through Coldgrip's teeth. "In Heaven's name, how came you to San Pedro, and when?"

"A letter—a hint—that—I—would find—him—here!"

"Well, you found him to your cost!" replied the detective, with a smile at his lips.

"He was here when I came—in this chair, too."

"You saw him, and went at him like a tiger?"

"Yes."

"I do not blame you for that, Mortimer; but you should never have left 'Frisco.'"

"I thought I could come here and find him. I did not intend to rob you of the glory, captain, but when I saw the Russian I could not keep back. Ye gods! how strong he is! Why, he rose from the chair and caught me like a ball, held me for a moment in the lamplight, and then struck twice in terrible succession."

"After that, what?"

"The man and the light vanished. I seemed to hear a door open and shut in the darkness, but I do not know. The pain was intense, here," and Mortimer put his hand on his breast. "A thousand needles were in my heart, it seemed. Ye gods! was I lured from 'Frisco for this?"

Captain Coldgrip fell to examining the young man's wounds, which were two cuts near the heart, as if a dagger had been driven through the flesh, aimed at the vital member.

Mortimer looked earnestly at him while the examination progressed. He tried to read the verdict in the detective's countenance, but it told him nothing despite his scrutiny.

"When did you come to San Pedro?" he asked.

"This morning a little after daylight; and you?"

"I reached the town at nine o'clock at night."

"That was about an hour ago. You came straight to the ranch."

Almost direct. The letter that told me that I, and no one else, would find Paul Demidoff in San Pedro, suggested that I enter the saloon and move straight upon the occupant of this room, which I did," and Mortimer finished with a sad smile.

"Did any one object to your invasion of this room?"

"Nobody seemed to notice me. The bar was having some boisterous custom when I entered El Paradiso, and I believe I was not seen at all."

"In other words, the coast was made clear for you," quietly remarked the detective. "If Donald the Dark had been here, and it was not his fault that he was absent, there would have been two tigers in lurking instead of one."

Mortimer shut his teeth hard, and then caught Captain Coldgrip's wrist.

"I don't want this den to be my hospital," he murmured.

"It shall not be!" was the prompt response. "You must get away from here at once. Summon all your strength. Don't think of the stabs in your breast. Remember only the oath of vengeance you took at your father's grave thousands of miles from here. To faint here, to fall under this roof, may be fatal."

Mortimer got up with an effort.

"See! I am ready!" he cried, wheeling upon the city sleuth. "I can't stand long with these wounds, but by the eternal! I won't die in this trap! Shall we go out by yon door through the bar-room?"

It was the only way, for no other door presented itself.

"Come," ejaculated Captain Claude, taking Mortimer's arm, and as the young man with a wonderful display of will power walked forward, he added under his breath:

"If I can get him to the hotel on the plaza, the play is mine!"

The bar-room had its usual crowd, a lot of mixed toughs attracted to San Pedro by its gambling tables and villainous liquors. The counter was besieged by this wild rabble, and the uproar was almost deafening when Captain Claude and his friend appeared in the doorway.

The couple got more than one inquisitive look, but nobody addressed them.

"Courage," whispered the cool detective.

"Beyond this pandemonium is vengeance."

Mortimer walked with an emphatic steadiness toward the door, and when they stepped out into the narrow street he gave Captain Claude a look of triumph.

On they went till the plaza with its playing fountain was reached.

"Ah! I've seen this before!" ejaculated Mortimer. "I saw a man at the fountain, among the big-leaved plants, as I crossed it."

"It was Donald. Concho saw him from the porch, but I did not," answered the sleuth. "A few more steps, Mortimer; then, rest."

Captain Coldgrip conducted the youth across the square to the Valley Rose, where a short

time before he had said good-night to Donald the Dark, bound and gagged in one of the upper rooms.

"Quick!" suddenly cried Mortimer, clutching the detective's arm as they reached the porch. "I feel the knife in my chest again. Oh, captain—for God's sake—It—is—over!"

The New York sleuth felt a dead weight in his arms, and the figure of Mortimer almost dropped to the floor.

"Tell me that nobody is to pay for this!" grated the detective as he carried the youth across the threshold and into the plain reception-room of the San Pedro Hotel.

The man who came to his assistance started back when he saw the deathlike cast of the young man's face.

"Is he your friend, sir?" he asked, meeting the spotter's eye.

"My best friend!" was the response.

"You want him in your room, then?"

"Not in the room I hired this morning. Give me another, and be quick about it, too."

The San Pedroan landlord hustled about and conducted Captain Coldgrip to a small apartment on the second floor, and not far from the one in which he had left the proprietor of the El Paradiso.

"Nothing about your new guest," he said sternly to the landlord, who held the lamp near Mortimer's white face.

"Who—who did it?" ventured the man.

"A man with a knife," was the evasive answer. "Go down now and leave me alone with him."

The lamp remained but the man withdrew, and the New York sleuth was once more alone with Mortimer.

After a while he left his charge and stole down a narrow corridor to a door which he opened with caution.

The room which he entered was dark and still.

Captain Coldgrip checked himself a few feet from the door, and listened.

At his right was the little cot where he had conquered the San Pedro boss. Was his victim still there?

At last the detective lit a match and pushed the little blaze forward. Under it glittered the Coldgrip revolver, with a deadly finger within the trigger-guard.

"He is gone!" cried the sleuth, as the cot and the wall appeared at the same instant. "Let me see. How did the yellow scoundrel get away?"

The following moment the keen eyes of the detective saw the bits of cord that hung toward the floor, then a nail, broken off and sharp, became visible alongside the cot.

"He made the nail an agent to freedom!" ejaculated Captain Claude. "He pushed a rope back and forth over it until, presto! he was free!"

The match went out, and the detective went back to the young man he had left.

Did he think that he would soon hear from Donald the Dark, or that the Russian ferret would attempt to flaish in San Pedro, by some bold play, the game begun long before on the Atlantic coast?

Mortimer had recovered from the second swoon, and greeted him with an inquisitive smile when he returned.

"It may not be so bad, after all!" he exclaimed. "The pain has vanished, and I feel like myself again."

Captain Coldgrip slowly shook his head.

"Don't build on that, boy," he answered gently, at the same time touching Mortimer's arm. "The Valley Rose may be your headquarters for some time."

"No! Any place but here! This is the trap into which, like a fool, I was decoyed. I dare not imperil the life of the landlord of this hotel by remaining his guest."

"I am also his boarder," smiled Captain Claude. "We will remain until there is a change."

Just then the two men heard a footstep beyond the door, and the face of the landlord appeared.

"Here's a message for you," he exclaimed, handing the detective a bit of folded paper, which was soon opened under the lamp.

Mortimer watched Captain Coldgrip with eager eyes while he read the paper.

His countenance did not seem to change, yet the young man thought he read that the message was an important one.

"Who brought this?" asked the New Yorker, wheeling upon the San Pedro Boniface.

"A boy."

"A San Pedro boy?"

"Yes."

"I'll be down directly." And as he dismissed the landlord with a look, Captain Claude walked to Mortimer's cot and bent over it with his keen, black eyes fixed on the anxious face.

"Can you spare me for a little while, Mortimer?" he asked.

"I can, because I trust you," was the answer. "Your face tells me that the message is important."

"It comes from a friend, and tells of a foe," replied the sleuth, and then Mortimer was alone.

CHAPTER XXVI. THE BOY HAWK.

WHAT had become of the man who had escaped from the little room in the Valley Rose? Let us see.

If Captain Coldgrip had been a few minutes sooner, he would have found Donald the Dark wrestling with his bonds, but, as we know, he had arrived too late to find the proprietor of El Paradiso still his prisoner.

Donald's first action was to recover the use of his limbs, which still felt the cords, and then, with a grated exclamation of mingled triumph and revenge, he stole swiftly from the plaza hotel, leaving it by the rear door, and escaping the detective and Mortimer who, about the same time, reached the front porch.

Of course Donald made his way back to his ranch. He expected to find the Russian in the private room, and, after a drink at the bar which cleared his dry and burning throat, he repaired to the place.

"So you are back—out of the tiger's hands with a whole skin!" exclaimed a man who turned upon Donald as he stepped across the threshold. "Do you know what's become of the fly that came to the net all the way from 'Frisco?"

The man was Colonel Redpath.

He had entered the private room a few seconds in advance of Donald, and some of the astonishment with which he had met the vacant chair, still lingered in his eyes.

"What fly from 'Frisco?" inquired the San Pedroan.

"Ha! don't you know? I had him here awhile ago, but you were absent. I left him in your chair with my signature on his breast; but as you see, the chair is empty. It is impossible that he should walk off after that."

"Maybe the Atlantic wonder came to him," remarked Donald.

"Was he here? Did Captain Coldgrip come hither and find Mortimer?"

"Jose will know," and Donald opened the door and called the man who presided behind the bar.

Jose had been very busy during the last two hours, but he believed that two men had left the private room together. After a brief reflection he was quite sure of it, and his decision removed all doubts from the Russian's mind.

"They cannot be far off!" he exclaimed, encircling Donald's wrist with his enormous hand. "Don't you want to get even with the man who caught you on the street awhile ago?"

Donald's eyes glittered.

"He did more than that. He tied me to a bed in the Valley Rose, while he came back and rescued your enemy, captain," was his answer. "But tell me about the 'Frisco fly. Who was he?"

"The young man, Mortimer."

"You must hate him to decoy him all the way to San Pedro to cut your name over his heart."

The Russian ferret seemed to recoil an inch.

"There is more in the young man than you think," he said. "I guess he has cause for hating me," and Colonel Redpath showed his teeth in a grin. "Like Captain Coldgrip, he has followed me across the continent; but he is not as cautious as the New York sleuth-hound. I could not go to 'Frisco to silence Mortimer, and so I had an adroit letter draw him to San Pedro. His eagerness to confront me proved the resistless temptation, and awhile ago he opened your door and found me waiting for your return. If he had found Captain Coldgrip first, I would have had a brush with that gentleman; but the boy came alone, and I left him finished in the chair."

Donald the Dark was silent for a moment.

"If the boy is badly wounded, he cannot be far away," he said at length.

"Badly wounded when I struck twice in the light of your lamp?" ejaculated the Russian.

"But he walked away with Captain Coldgrip; Jose saw them, you know."

"Confound it! he must have the multiplied lives of a cat! Are we going to let the two escape?"

"I want to find the Atlantic sleuth. I think I owe him one. If Mortimer is not able to be taken far, he may now be at the Valley Rose."

"Not out of my hands yet, then," cried the Russian. "Claude Coldgrip will not have the bulldog courage to try to protect him there. Why, San Pedro can be turned loose upon them."

"Not till the last moment," replied Donald.

"It does not take a whole town to conquer one man. San Pedro is in my hands, and the men who inhabit it will obey me as a subject obeys his king. At the Valley Rose he wanted to know what had become of Medora."

"And you told him, of course?" cried Colonel Redpath, breaking into a sarcastic laugh.

"Yes, I told him," grinned the boss of San Pedro. "He offered me a cool thousand for the secret, but that was nothing. What do I want with a sleuth's money? You see that he is after the young woman as much as he is after you."

"And he will get one as soon as the other!" was the quick rejoinder. "Let us open an offensive campaign, Donald. I am tired of playing hide and seek with Captain Coldgrip. I

know of no better place for a change of front than San Pedro. Besides, I want to make the move which will end the game and give me final victory. I told Cyclone in Yellow Jacket that if he made a certain discovery, a message was to be sent to you for me. I do not think it will come, for the person whom it concerns knows enough of me to attempt no side-play of vengeance. Once I refused to step in and prevent a woman from being marked for life, and she, on that account, has taken a few little vows of vengeance. Ho! ho! if I have no other person to match, Donald, I am the luckiest fellow in America!"

Donald the Dark, of San Pedro, shrugged his shoulders.

"A woman's dagger is always sharp and her eyes are keen," he exclaimed, in a manner which told the Russian that to his sentence hung a thrilling tale.

"This woman is no exception; but she will not follow me to San Pedro," was the answer. "She will go back to the Cyclone first, and he will tell her what a fool she is to hunt the man who kept her from the fate that thousands meet in the iron-ruled empire over the sea. Now I feel ready for Captain Coldgrip. The girl is safe where he cannot find her without I take him to her, and that I will never do. If the two are in San Pedro yet, let us know it, Donald; if they have departed, they have left a trail."

About this time a horse which, coming from the north, had crossed the valley and entered San Pedro, reached the plaza.

The animal showed signs of fatigue, and as he bore his rider past the fountain, he cast wistful glances toward the water.

"I'm here on the battle-ground!" exclaimed the person in the saddle, as rein was drawn in front of a small house some distance beyond the square.

The next moment the door was opened, and a man with a bright-eyed boy at his side looked out and saw the new arrival.

"Santa Cristol is it you?" cried the man, as the steed's rider slipped to the ground and came forward.

The boy's eyes dilated, and he ran back into the house with a light cry.

The following minute the man came in, accompanied by a woman whose eyes had an eager look, and who walked to the boy watching her with more than childish interest.

"Your father tells me that he is here, Juan," she said to the little fellow. "Oh! your eyes see every thing, don't they?"

"I don't know; but he is so big that one can not miss seeing him when he is about," was the answer. "But a strange man is here also. He came early this morning, and smokes much of his time on the porch of the plaza hotel."

"What is he like, little one?" asked the woman.

"He is a good-looking man with a smooth face."

"And real dark eyes, Juan?"

"And real dark eyes."

The woman turned to the silent man with a smile.

"I thought he would be here," she exclaimed, and then she went back to the boy.

"Is the guest of the Valley Rose still there?" she asked.

"He was smoking at sundown."

"Then you must take a message to him, Juan."

"When, lady?"

"Right away."

"The boy will take it," said the man, as the little fellow did not reply. "Juan will do any thing I tell him, and I say he shall carry the message."

The woman, who was Coral, walked to the little table, and found in a drawer there a piece of paper, on which she began to write.

"Juan has been playing hawk since you were here last," observed the man watching her.

Coral stopped writing and looked up.

"What has he discovered?" she asked.

"Let him talk for himself."

Coral looked at the boy with a smile of encouragement.

"What have you found out, my Juan?"

"I have followed the big man who wears a red beard when he comes to San Pedro, but a smooth face in the mountains."

"A wolf with two skins!" laughed Coral. "Go on, Juan."

"He always goes to one place when he quits San Pedro, and he never leaves it in the daytime."

"And you have followed him, my boy?"

Juan nodded, his eyes sparkling the while.

"I have tried to keep at his heels," was the answer. "He is shrewd, if he is big. He can walk like a cat if he has the bulk of an overgrown mountain lion. But he did not fool me, lady. The eyes of Juan hunted him down in spite of the winding trails he made."

"And you found—what?" ejaculated Coral, grasping the boy's arm.

"Ah! you ought to know!" exclaimed Juan. "Is she a sister of yours?"

A strange cry broke from Coral's throat.

She left the table and almost lifted the boy from the floor.

"Your eyes have been keener than Captain Claude's!" she cried. "You have discovered the secret that has baffled him. You have found—Medora!"

The boy gave her a look of wonder; then his eyes filled with pride.

"Well, I found her, whoever she is," he cried. "Major Mystery led me to her against his will, for if he had known I was at his heels, he would have turned on me."

"And there would now be no Juan to tell me this," exclaimed Coral.

Then she asked in a lowered and anxious voice:

"Could you find the place without following the big man, Juan?"

"Yes, lady."

"Then you shall lead the American sleuth to victory!" was the reply. "Wait for the message which you must take to the man at the plaza hotel."

Coral went back to her task, and for several minutes wrote rapidly, watched all the time by man and boy.

"Take this to the landlord of the Valley Rest," she said to Juan, as she folded the message. "Tell him it is for the guest who came to-day, and wait till you are joined by that guest."

The boy took the message and stowed it away beneath his jacket.

"Keep clear of the big man—of Major Mystery!" called Coral after him, as he disappeared beyond the door.

"Trust Juan for that," cried the man, proudly. "The boy is worth his weight in gold. Shall you wait here for him?"

"Yes. Let my horse be put away, but where I can reach him in a moment."

The man retired, and then the Coral of Silver Deck jerked a packet from her bosom and held it up in the light of the cabin lamp.

Her eyes got a new glitter while she looked at it. Emotion shook her frame as the wind shakes a leaf.

"In a little while," she cried. "A few hours at the furthest, and then—then the union of flesh and red-hot steel!"

CHAPTER XXVII. CLOSE QUARTERS.

CLAUDE COLDGRIP did not know whom he was to meet when, in response to the message which had been handed to him by the landlord of the plaza hostelry, he went below, leaving Mortimer for the moment alone.

There was nothing in the message to indicate that Coral had indited it, and nothing that told him that the woman he had met on her way to Yellow Jacket had turned up in San Pedro.

The name of the Russian sleuth was mentioned once in the brief sentences, hence the New York spotter's remark to Mortimer that the message was from a friend and told of a foe.

Therefore, when Captain Coldgrip found the boy Juan waiting for him in the little "office" of the Valley Rose, he was inclined to smile; but the eager, earnest look of the boy attracted him.

"I guess I'm the person you want to see," said Juan, gliding up to the detective. "At least, I'm the one who fetched the note."

"From whom?" questioned the detective.

Juan, who remembered final instructions, seemed to draw back, but with an amused smile at the corners of his mouth.

"That's neither here nor there," he exclaimed, looking up into the sleuth's face. "I guess you want to find the person who left Silver Deck some time ago."

By this time the two had left the hotel and stood among the shadows of the porch fronting the fountain.

"Do you know where he is?" asked Captain Claude.

Juan shook his head.

"He may be here yet, for he came in after you, but I am talking about the girl."

"About Medora!" ejaculated the detective, and then his grip tightened on the boy's arm as he stooped a little. "I'd sooner find the big man first. I lost him awhile ago."

"Well, the major first if you say so," was the answer. "I am not here to show you his trail. If you don't want to find Medora, captain, you will let me go back."

"Is she near?"

"She is in the mountains."

"And they are—"

"Beyond the valley."

"What is your name?"

"Juan."

"You are Mexican."

"My mother was American!" flashed the boy, drawing proudly up before the detective.

"My father has Mexican blood in his veins, but he isn't to blame for that if it isn't against him."

Captain Claude could not keep back a smile at this display of spirit.

"The person who wrote the message you brought wants me to go at once to Medora?"

"Yes," answered Juan promptly.

"Man or woman?"

Juan did not reply. "I can not go now. I have a sick friend up-stairs. The bird in the mountains will not take flight."

"That depends on Major Mystery."

"I know that. To leave Mortimer here with the knife of the enemy eager to complete its work, would be cruel. Go back to the message writer, and say that I must stay."

"I will go," was the response. "Of course if you will not follow me, I cannot show you the mountain nest. At any time, captain, I am at your service. You are American, and one of my mother's people."

The grip of the detective now set free the boy's arm, and before he could be detained or questioned further, he bounded from the porch and disappeared.

A few leaps carried him across the plaza, and dodging into the dark and narrow street beyond, he was soon at his father's door.

"Why do you come back alone?" exclaimed Coral at sight of him, and she met him half-way between door and table, pouncing upon him like a watchful hawk. "You were to guide the man to Medora; you were to take him out of San Pedro to-night—now!"

"What if he would not go?" grinned Juan. "Suppose I found him with business on his hands at the Valley Rose?"

"Will he stay despite my message?"

"He can't quit a sick friend."

Coral's look was full of curiosity.

"A sick friend?" she repeated. "Claude Coldgrip has no friends in San Pedro."

"He called the person Mortimer."

"Merciful heaven!" ejaculated the woman. "Why, a few hours ago he told me that the boy Mortimer, was in 'Frisco. Now he says he is here! You hear this, Sancho?" she added, turning to the swarthy father.

"Juan has an excellent memory. If he has heard that Mortimer is here, he knows who told him."

Coral did not answer.

"Go out again, Juan," she exclaimed after an interval and suddenly, as if a thought had struck her.

"Back to the man at the Valley Rose?"

"Not to him, but learn all you can—about Mortimer. If you can find Major Mystery let me hear of it; if you see Donald, watch him a little."

"Any thing else, lady?" asked Juan with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Is it too much, my boy?"

"Nothing is too much for Juan," said Sancho with a proud glance at his offspring.

"I will be in the game directly," continued Coral. "But the time has not come for it. There are no forges at my command in San Pedro. The mountains that hem the valley in are full of them."

As there were no more instructions for Juan, he touched his hat to Lady Cyclone and disappeared.

A few yards beyond the house he stopped, then drew back into the shadow of a tree and stood like a statue.

A moving, skulking figure had caught Juan's eye.

It passed him on the opposite side of the street, and seemed to sink into the ground at the root of a tree.

But the boy knew that the skulker had not vanished, for his eagle eyes distinguished a dark something against the tree. The prowler was watching him.

For some minutes Juan kept his position, moving not, and with his whole attention riveted on the person across the way.

At last the figure watched by the boy moved off, and then Juan saw the flame of a match as it touched a cigarette.

He had deceived the prowler, for the movement indicated that the man had given up the espionage.

Juan followed, but not until the man had a good start.

Had he been watching the house that sheltered Coral? Perhaps he had listened at the window. The San Pedro boy thought of this.

The man kept on down the street till he reached the plaza with the fountain between him and the Valley Rose Hotel.

Then it was that Juan recognized him, for the bit of light which he crossed held him long enough to fix his identity.

"So you are out with your tasseled boots on, Donald!" laughed the boy. "The lady told me to keep an eye on you if I found you, and, sure enough, here you are!"

Donald the Dark crept around the plaza till the hotel was fairly in sight, when he chose a good station for observation, and watched it some time.

With the movement of a young lynx Juan crept forward along the buildings until he was within a few feet of the proprietor of El Paradiso. The boy wondered what had become of the Russian. He knew that Donald the Dark was Colonel Redpath's ally, but here the ally was at work, and the giant was not to be seen.

Donald seemed to be taking observations, for all at once he crept toward the plaza hotel, and reached the porch at one end.

The pillars that supported the roof were neither high nor large, and although Donald was not tall, he could touch the eave by putting his hands above his head.

Juan saw him do this very thing after he reached the porch, and the next moment with the assistance of the pillar at his right, he drew himself up with the agility of a prowling cat.

"Something is in the wind when Donald makes a move like that," ejaculated the boy of San Pedro, and then for a moment he watched the dark figure of the Californian crawl across the roof toward the windows of the second story.

"The sick man is somewhere in the hotel," flashed across Juan's mind. "The man I went to see for the lady, told me if he deserted him, he would be in danger of a knife. And Captain Donald carries the keenest blade in all San Pedro."

The crawling ruffian had now reached the house, and Juan could see a dark object lying under one of the windows.

"I don't like Donald. I never did!" murmured the boy. "He let Jose, his bartender, cheat Sancho my father one night, and I told Jose myself that I would get even one of these days. Aha! Captain Donald, I think Juan's time has come!"

The boy crept through the shadows of tree and house toward the porch, then all at once he sprang upon it and into the hotel itself.

There was no one in the office at the time of his entrance, but the boy was not to be balked by this.

He had been to the Valley Rose before. The interior of the house was known to him, but he did not know which room was occupied by Mortimer and his friend.

Juan went from the office to the stair that led to the rooms above.

The way was gloomy and rather intricate, for the house had not been built after the manner of modern hotels; still, Juan, in a little while, found his way to the lane-like corridors overhead.

Meanwhile, Donald the Dark had moved under the window over the roof of the porch.

With the eyes of a night-owl he had discovered that the chamber beyond it was unoccupied, and that it was the same one in which Captain Coldgrip had left him bound on the cot.

Cautiously he tried the window with his silken hands. It yielded a hair's breadth, then an inch, and the next moment the wiry boss of San Pedro was squeezing his body through.

He knew that entrance into the chamber would give him a key to the whole interior of the Valley Rose.

Juan, the boy spy, was in the corridor a few feet away when Donald was wriggling into the room by the window.

A collision could hardly be avoided.

The proprietor of El Paradiso accomplished his object to his satisfaction, and at last dropping the window noiselessly after him, he moved toward the door.

"Let me find the bird the major wounded; that is what I want first," he ejaculated in an undertone. "I know that he brought him to this nest, and he must need watching after the two stabs he got at El Paradiso. The major is on ground elsewhere, and I have but to find the foe before the last play—the grand assault on the Yankee sleuth who never gives up a trail once struck."

Dark Donald opened the door as cautiously as he had raised the sash.

He studied the running corridor for a few moments, and saw the outlines of the three doors on his right.

"I have three chances," he muttered. "One of them will locate the quarry."

A minute later, Donald the Dark was at the first door, in front of which was a hallway leading to another part of the house.

The yellow sport put his ear to the latch, and heard—a distinct footstep behind him!

To hear this was for Captain Donald to wheel at once, and then he sprang into the passage ahead, a quick cry at his lips.

All at once a startling shriek rung through the house, but it died out as abruptly as it had started.

It told that Juan had collided with Donald the Dark.

CHAPTER XXVIII. COOLLY CAUGHT.

IN the darkest part of the hallway, the proprietor of El Paradiso caught the person who had aroused him by a step.

Coral's little messenger, the boy of San Pedro, had come upon Donald where he had no thought of meeting him, and the wild cry leaped from his throat as the hands of the yellow sport closed savagely upon him.

Donald knew Juan very well, and instinct seemed to tell him that the boy had invaded the plaza hotel with the intention of doing him harm.

Juan was not held long in Donald's grip, for a few seconds after the capture he was tossed senseless into an empty room, while the victor turned back to the other corridor.

In this brief time was the battle fought and won by Donald the Dark.

"Captain Coldgrip is not in the house, else the whine of the cat, Juan, would have brought him forward," Donald murmured. "The boy

cut by the major is not able to see what the cry meant, so I can investigate at my leisure."

At his leisure!

The boss of San Pedro was about to discover that he was a poor prophet, for at that moment, a few feet away, the figure of Captain Claude was waiting for his advance.

On came Donald, unconscious of the presence of the Atlantic sleuth, nor was he made aware of it until a hand, darting from the semi-gloom, fell upon his shoulder.

Donald's own hand went at once to his belt, but the face of Captain Coldgrip came forward till it almost touched his, and he saw the gleaming and menacing eyes of the New York sleuth.

The sport of El Paradiso could not find his tongue, and his look soon became a stare.

"You make a noise when you come, Captain Donald," ejaculated the detective. "A man of your cunning ought to be able to move about without disturbing one."

Did the Atlantic hunter know that Juan had been strangled by the hands that were kept from a revolver only by the light in his eyes?

Donald wondered if this could be.

"You fixed me awhile ago, captain," answered Donald, showing his teeth. "But did you not see the broken nail in the bed? the nail, ha, ha!"

"I saw it afterward; but that is passed, Donald. Let us go away from here."

"Must I be called your prisoner again?"

"Fix that as you like," smiled Captain Claude. "Donald, my old friend," there was a tinge of irony in the detective's voice, "why doesn't the Russian cat hunt mice for himself?"

The question seemed to startle the boss of El Paradiso.

"Keep your tongue quiet if it suits you," continued Captain Coldgrip. "Does the major, as you call him in San Pedro, wait for you in the little room near your busy bar? Were you to report to him there after this little reconnaissance?"

Donald the Dark shrugged his shapely shoulders and replied with a laugh.

"*Santissima!*" he cried, touching the detective's arm. "You beat the world, the whole world, captain. There's no use trying to beat you. I give up the game. It is yours!"

"The old play," murmured the New York ferret. "Coral said Donald was double-faced, and here he is proving it in an admirable manner."

"Go down and take the major. You want him," resumed the owner of El Paradiso. "You will find him in the little room. He was to wait there for me. I want to go back to the quiet of my ranch. This work doesn't suit me. Hal captain; you can see by my blunders that I was never cut out for it."

To all outward appearance Donald was honest in his words, but this sudden conversion, this very unexpected change of front, was the very thing that put the tireless sleuth on his guard.

"I take you at your word, Captain Donald," replied Coldgrip. "If the major is in the little room, we will go down at once. Of course he is very anxious to see me. Ah! you are ready for the walk. Let us go."

Donald swallowed his chagrin, but not with very good grace, and when he found himself being led away by the enemy, he muttered vengeance within the hour.

He had seen nothing of Mortimer, but it was not yet too late to find the youth who had been lured from 'Frisco by Colonel Redpath's scheming. He could be seen after they dealt finally with the human terret of the East.

Captain Coldgrip conducted Donald the Dark from the hotel by the rear door, a route to which the San Pedro sport did not object, and a minute later they found themselves in the starlight.

What was the detective's plan?

He was going to meet the Russian in company with the most treacherous villain in Southern California, and their destination was the gilded den of that same rascal.

But the reader may imagine that Captain Claude at this critical moment knew just what he was about.

Donald was no longer held a prisoner. The hands of the detective did not touch him, but an eye that never seemed to sleep watched him like a falcon.

The boss of San Pedro walked straight to his ranch.

He knew that Colonel Redpath was likely to be found in the private room, for he had promised to receive his report in the chair where the detective had recently found Mortimer more dead than alive.

When Donald opened the door of his place and at a glance saw the motley crowd that swarmed it even to the counter, a gleam of satisfaction lit up his eyes.

"Straight to the private room, Captain Donald," whispered the sleuth.

"Yes, sir," was the answer, but the owner of El Paradiso finished under his breath as he stepped inside: "It shall be straight to the end of the long run across the continent, Captain Claude!"

Donald was a conspicuous figure at all times

in San Pedro, but now, alongside the handsome detective sport, he was sure of being noticed by the tenants of the gaudy drinking-room.

His name was mentioned by a dozen men when he made his appearance, and as he came forward, his eye seeing every one and giving all a meaningful glance, the uproar grew still as if by the speaking of a command.

"These men are all mine," passed through Donald's mind. "Let me but lift my finger and Captain Coldgrip will look into the barrels of fifty revolvers. Aha! captain, you have walked like a fool into Dark Donald's trap. It catches more than flies. Ho! ho! its game is bigger than that."

The two men came down the room, Captain Coldgrip seeing the entire crowd, but with a different eye than Donald's.

It was not his first introduction to a lot of Southwest toughs.

More than once before, as the reader knows, he had faced assemblies just as hard as the one he met when he coolly entered the El Paradiso.

The private door was shut. Beyond it Captain Claude expected to find the man he had already sought in the same place, but had not found.

This time he knew he would not encounter Mortimer in the chair.

Donald the Dark led the way to the door, but as he touched the latch he exchanged a swift look with Jose, the bartender. After that the yellow sport's lips met firmly. He knew that Colonel Redpath was just beyond the planks.

All at once Donald opened the door, and the two men, sleuth and spy, stepped forward, both crossing the threshold of the private room at once.

A man rose before them as the door swung shut behind Donald.

It was Colonel Redpath!

His eye saw his ally first, then it fell upon the man at his side.

"Good-night, colonel," exclaimed Captain Coldgrip, at the same time throwing up his hand and covering the stalwart figure of the Russian with a six-shooter. "Captain Donald, you see, is very clever. He brings me to you, but no introduction is necessary, as we have met before!"

The eyes of the two sleuths had met before this, and Donald, who had stepped aside, looked first at one, then at the other.

"You have found me at last, captain," said the Russian, a smile playing with his lips while he spoke.

"Did you expect to escape?" was the answer.

"I expected to give you a little trouble, and I think I have. You don't keep your word with all men, I see."

"I have not broken it with you. In New York I promised you to find the exiles of Russia. I have found them. I also promised to find the man who left the aged millionaire murdered in his library. Will you say that I have not been successful?"

There was quiet triumph in the Atlantic spotter's voice, but a triumph which was reflected in his eyes.

"You talk of long trails, Colonel Redpath," Captain Claude went on. "Yours began in Russia. You traversed the greater part of Europe, crossed the sea, and then a continent. My trail has been a long one, too, but much of it was zigzag, for you make crooked paths like a hunted fox. We will discuss other affairs beyond this room, and at another time. Our mutual friend, Donald, will take your claws from you, for I don't escort armed tigers out of the clutches of their own."

"Come forward, Donald," said the Russian.

"A man who has allowed himself to be caught in this manner ought to submit like a lamb."

The proprietor of El Paradiso walked toward the Muscovite, but with much reluctance.

As he came near, Colonel Redpath drew two revolvers which he placed in his hands. These weapons were followed by a sheathed knife, which Donald also took.

"Toss them upon the bed over yonder," commanded the New York sleuth, nodding toward Donald's cot which occupied one of the corners of the room, and the toss was successfully made.

"Now your own little knife, Donald."

"My—knife—captain?"

"Ay; the one you got from Jose, as you rounded the counter awhile ago."

Donald bit his lip and took from his sleeve a narrow-bladed knife like a stiletto, which, with a look and a growl, he threw after the Russian's weapons.

"We will go now, colonel," resumed Captain Coldgrip. "Let me say that we are to pass through the bar-room where we will find some of Captain Donald's customers. You will walk quietly through to the street beyond. You know that this game is played by men, and I need not say that I am here to hold, dead or alive, the body of Count Demidoff, alias Colonel Redpath, the palace spy, and the New York murderer."

The last epithet dilated the watchful eyes of Donald the Dark like a startling revelation.

A quick look passed between the Russian and himself.

"You never told me of this," said Donald's glance.

"I didn't have to," answered Colonel Redpath's eyes.

The next moment the Russian stepped toward the door like a man eager to have out some unpleasant scene which cannot be avoided.

Donald's hand threw it open, and as the Muscovite sleuth touched the threshold, he felt the fingers of Captain Coldgrip on his arm.

The swarthy toughs at the bar seemed to divine what had happened.

Two men had gone into the private room, but three were coming out, and in the right hand of one was gripped a cocked revolver.

The crowd drew back, and the movement cleared a narrow way to the door.

The giant figure of the Russian moved forward, watched by the cool man who had risked so much for him; but at the same time the city sleuth saw the silent crowd.

Donald halted at the end of the counter. Jose glided instantly to his side.

"What does it mean?" whispered the bartender.

"The major's a prisoner! The Yankee Tiger has caught him under our very noses!"

Jose was not the only person who heard these grated words.

Half a dozen men who had leaned forward to catch Donald's reply had caught every syllable.

Instantly a big man wheeled upon Captain Coldgrip and his prisoner, almost at the door.

"That's a catch by a Yankee sleuth-bound!" he cried. "Shoot Major Mystery loose!"

The words thrilled every listener, and the parted crowds melted into one.

Captain Coldgrip stopped and turned.

"Gentlemen," he said coolly to the valley toughs, "I have only taken my own. I hold him dead or alive!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A COOL HAND WELL PLAYED.

"You can't take that man away from hyer! Don't you know that?"

The voice came from the furthest end of the room, and the man who uttered the words was a veritable giant, with an imminent breadth of chest, and a large hat thrown back, so as to reveal his forehead to the beginning of his shock of dark hair.

"Not if we say he can't, Rufe!" cried half a dozen voices. "We don't allow no trail dog ter rob San Pedro of one of her citizens!"

"Let 'im go," counseled Donald in low tones to those nearest him. "There's death in the eyes that look over his revolvers. The street isn't safe for him. He can't carry Major Mystery off."

It was easy for the proprietor of El Paradiso to give advice, but the crowd was not in the humor for accepting it.

A minute, and one fraught with fate, had elapsed since Captain Coldgrip had turned on the crowd.

The Russian was waiting for the next turn of the wheel.

"Mebbe he wants to go with the Yankee cop!" shouted somebody. "After all, it mayn't be compulsion, but a sham game for divisible stakes."

The next instant Colonel Redpath's eye caught the speaker, and bestowed a look of resentment.

"I am able to fight my own battles," he cried. "I don't ask a man in San Pedro to lift a hand for rescue. Never in my life have I whined for help, and I never will! This man is Captain Coldgrip, a Yankee sleuth, and no friend of mine. You need not look at him with your hands on your pistols. There is not in the crowd before me a man with nerve enough to take a revolver from a belt. Let us go, captain. For Heaven's sake take me away from these cowards of San Pedro!"

The words cut like two-edged knives, and the Muscovite found the looks of fury, until then directed at the New York spotter, turned on him.

Captain Coldgrip dropped one hand and opened the door.

He saw his moment and knew that it would be followed by one likely to give a crimson coloring to the scene.

Colonel Redpath walked out without orders, and as the Atlantic sleuth joined him, he showed his teeth and said madly:

"A room full of cowards, captain. A boy with a toy pistol could hold the whole Satanic set at bay."

It was evident that the foreign sleuth was disappointed.

He could curse the men from whom he looked for rescue, and he did so heartily, but not in open outbreak.

The hand of the detective once more touched his arm, and the pair walked away.

"What will he do with the elephant he has caught?" thought Colonel Redpath, the question lending an amused expression of countenance to his swarthy face. "He certainly will not attempt to take me overland to 'Frisco, nor to New York. Why, I would turn the tables on him within twenty-four hours! He has not forgotten what Grant Thurston, the exile, must

have told him—that I was called the best police ferret in St. Petersburg, and one of the strongest men in the Czar Alexander's dominions. Now that I am in the clutches of Captain Coldgrip, I am anxious to see his first move."

Neither of the men looked back to see whether they were watched from the door of El Paradiso, but both moved down the narrow street which a short distance away would strike the plaza where the fountain danced.

"To the plaza hotel, eh?" mentally ejaculated Colonel Redpath, suddenly guessing at the detective's goal. "Is Mortimer there? Does he intend to exhibit me in triumph to the young fellow I lured from 'Frisco?"

The plaza was reached, and then the porch of the Valley Rose.

"Walk in, colonel," said the detective with a smile, and the Russian stepped upon the porch and strode into the office, where he was greeted by the proprietor with an exclamation of surprise.

"Bring me a lasso," cried Captain Coldgrip, while the man stared at the Russian.

"What is it for, captain?" asked Colonel Redpath.

"Not for the throat, colonel, so don't worry," was the light reply.

The landlord retired, but soon came back with a coil of black rope which both men at once recognized.

"You will tie Major Mystery," continued the New York sleuth, and then he stepped back and threw up the weapon he still carried.

"Don't let my person frighten you, Ignace," laughed the Russian, seeing the look of indecision that changed the landlord's color. "I am one of the most obliging fellows Captain Coldgrip has ever run down."

And he held out his hands, wrist to wrist, for the lasso.

Ignace, the landlord, uncoiled the rope and went to work.

He was closely watched by the detective, who saw that the knots were not treacherous, and that the lasso was the best of its kind.

"Where is Pablo?" suddenly asked Captain Claude.

"Maybe at his shanty. He took my other guest away to-night."

"Concho, you mean?"

"Concho! The big fellow got frightened at something, Heaven knows what, and engaged Pablo to place him on the trail to his mine at San Luis Potosi. But Pablo did not go far with him."

"Bring Pablo to me, and tell him to come with his best horse saddled for the trail."

Ignace's eyes were filled with wonder. The appearance of Colonel Redpath at his little hostelry, as the prisoner of his last guest, was one of the profoundest puzzles he (Ignace) had ever encountered.

He did not refuse to obey Captain Claude, but touched his hat, a polite habit of his, and went off in search of the proprietor of the best stable of horses in the Valley.

Five minutes had hardly elapsed ere Ignace came back with the information that Pablo would be on hand in a few moments.

"My own horse now," said the detective.

"Ah! it means a ride from San Pedro!" exclaimed the landlord, as light seemed to break in upon his mind. "The captain is going to leave the young man up-stairs. Holy Mother! maybe the young man is dead!"

This alarming thought did not deter Ignace from quitting his hotel to get Captain Coldgrip's horse.

"Ignace, in the Virgin's name, why did you tie Major Mystery in there?" cried a voice at the landlord's side, and he looked down into the face of Juan, the San Pedro boy.

"He gave the orders, Juan. He stood by with his finger at the trigger, and with fire in his eye. And the giant, the major, I mean, held out his hands for the lasso. Isn't it funny, Juan? What does it all mean, and where did he catch the major?"

Juan shook his head.

"What is to come next?" he asked. "Pablo's best horse is to be at the hotel in a few minutes, and I am to meet him with the captain's."

"They are going away! that is clear!" cried the boy.

"The captain is going to carry Major Mystery off. It is a catch, Juan. Who knows that the major did not strike the man up-stairs?"

"Nobody else did it," was the answer. "The wounds aren't so bad after all."

"How do you know?"

"I have seen them."

The look which Ignace threw down into Juan's face was full of astonishment.

"The wounds are not wide, for Major Mystery's dagger was not much bigger than an Italian's stiletto. Besides, Mortimer told me that the major had to strike over his arm, which prevented the knife from sinking to the hilt. He won't get out for some days, Ignace, and he may be your guest till Captain Coldgrip comes back."

Juan did not see fit to mention his collision with Donald the Dark. He did not tell Ignace that he had had a very narrow escape from a

death-choking at the hands of San Pedro's boss.

Much of this conversation had been carried on by man and boy between the hotel and stable.

Ignace found Captain Coldgrip's horse, and the criminal was soon made ready for a journey.

When he led him up to the porch another horse was seen crossing the plaza, and the next minute Pablo was hailed by the landlord.

Ignace went inside to announce the arrivals, and found the two men standing where he had left them.

"How is Mortimer?" asked the detective.

"The boy says he is doing well," was the reply, with a quick glance at Colonel Redpath. "The wounds do not seem to be deep, Juan tells me."

"Juan! Ah! I wish I had choked the little meddler long ago!" growled the Russian, under his breath.

"I leave Mortimer in your care for a while," continued Captain Claude. "The man I am taking off with me is the only living enemy the boy has. No other hand will ever be raised against him, and this one will not touch him any more. I will come back for him. Say this to him for me, and add that it will not be long, either."

At this moment the rounded face and little eyes of Pablo appeared on the scene.

"Come, colonel," Captain Coldgrip went on, addressing his quarry, "the horses are waiting for us beyond the porch."

For a second the dark eyes of the Russian held a tigerish light, but it vanished as he walked forward, his hands lashed together in front by the black lasso which Ignace had handled with great cleverness.

The boy hawk of San Pedro saw the spotter and his prisoner emerge from the hotel.

"What if the lady at our house should see this?" he exclaimed.

"Can't I see that she doesn't want Major Mystery to fall into the captain's hands, yet she hates the very ground he treads. I'll see 'em start, and then I'll tell her. *Santa Cristo!* how her black eyes will flash!"

Juan had chosen a spot from whence he could see without being himself observed, and from it he saw the Russian sleuth seat himself in the saddle of Pablo's horse with the assistance of Ignace.

Captain Coldgrip was soon at his prisoner's side.

The boy saw him look toward Dark Donald's den.

"I think he expects a rescue," ejaculated the little fellow.

"If Donald has San Pedro at his back, as he likes to boast, why doesn't he show his teeth before Captain Coldgrip takes his friend, the major, off? Ah, Donald! I guess you're not as savage as you've been painted."

The sharp eyes of the San Pedro boy had discovered that a black cord like a lasso extended from Colonel Redpath to the sleuth's saddle.

All at once the New York ferret caught up the lines.

He gave Ignace a glance, and then looked up at the little window above the porch of the hotel. To Juan it was an "adieu" to Mortimer.

A moment later the two horses had moved off, and then the fountain in the plaza rose between them and Ignace's little hostelry.

Juan, and more than he, held his breath.

He expected to hear the air ring with shots; he looked for Donald the Dark to spring forward and shoot Captain Coldgrip from his saddle before the plaza was behind him.

But nothing of the kind occurred.

"Now for the lady!" exclaimed Juan, bounding away. "She wants this news, and I want to see her eyes snap over it."

A few seconds later he burst into his father's cabin.

"He caught his man! The captain has just gone off with Major Mystery!" cried the boy.

A startling cry from Coral's throat was the answer.

She came toward the boy with the look of a fury, but passed him suddenly, and flung wide the door.

"My horse, Sanchol!" she cried, and was gone.

CHAPTER XXX.

CYCLONE ON HAND.

THERE would have been a mad rush from the ranch El Paradiso and some hot work on the street if Donald the Dark had not held the crowd back.

The wily boss of San Pedro had passed through two sieges of the Atlantic detective's coolness, and he did not intend to lose his life leading a bold bolt for Colonel Redpath's rescue.

It was Donald's refusal to sanction the opening of hostilities which enabled Captain Coldgrip to get his prisoner safely to the plaza hotel, and thence to the horses.

The very boldness of the capture, with the coolness of the New York sleuth when he turned upon the crowd and looked its bronzed characters calmly in the eye, was enough to give all an insight into the man.

Some one slipped from the ranch and discovered that the detective had actually taken the Russian off.

"The major and the sleuth for it!" exclaimed

Donald, when the truth was reported to him. "He went like a lamb, expecting to play the lion, as I could see by his eyes. But he's got a job on hand this time. I should say the toughest job of his life."

The capture was still the topic at the bar when a man entered the place and inquired for Donald.

"I have a message for the colonel," said this individual addressing Donald who had come to the front.

"You're a little too late," answered the yellow sport with a smile.

"Isn't he here?"

"Not at present, and, from all appearances, not likely to be for some time."

"Then he won't get the information I promised to get to him."

"Is it important?"

"He would call it so."

"Anything about the man who pounced upon him awhile ago?"

"What man?"

"Captain Coldgrip."

The man with the message for Colonel Redpath started.

"Did he take the big colonel away from San Pedro?" he exclaimed.

"Ask the boys in there!" replied Donald, nodding toward the bar-room.

"I thought the colonel had friends here!" was the quick response.

"So he had, but sometimes men have a care for their own lives. Great Jovel my friend, we must look out for number one, you know, and they say that Captain Coldgrip carries no toy pistols when he follows a man across the continent."

The listener did not speak.

Captain Coldgrip's success at El Paradiso was an event for which he was not prepared, and it seemed to have taken his breath.

"Very well," he said at last, looking up into Donald's face. "If the colonel has fallen into the Yankee spotter's hands, he must get out the best way he can. Let me ask you, Captain Donald, if you have seen a woman in San Pedro since noon to-day?"

"None that has a hand in this game."

There was flat contradiction in Donald's look even while he spoke.

"You are Cyclone," he went on, catching the stranger's arm. "Don't say no, for your question about the woman gives you away."

The stranger's eyes got a twinkle.

"Now that you know me you will talk, Donald. I am Cyclone. If I had been here awhile ago Captain Coldgrip would never have crossed the plaza with Colonel Redpath. I should have been here ere this, but I was delayed in Yellow Jacket. My money lasted longer than I thought it would, ha, ha! The woman has been here?"

"She is here now," said Donald, lowering his voice.

"Where is she?"

Cyclone's question was couched in eager tones.

"In the first place, what do you want of her?" asked the boss of San Pedro.

"Perhaps nothing. I want to locate her—to render certain things safe, you know. She did not get to see the colonel?"

"She did not see him."

"Excellent! Then she does not know that the Yankee sleuth made his swoop."

"I am not so sure about that," exclaimed Donald. "I saw a boy to-night who, if my fingers failed me when they had his little throat in their trap, may have told her a great deal, for she is at his father's house—her secret quarters when she comes to San Pedro, which is not often."

"Where is the house? Will you direct me, Captain Donald?"

"In a moment. I want to know something about this woman," said Donald the Dark.

"But you must not keep me here."

"Not for long, Cyclone. She came here once, it was some time ago, and broke Porto Banco's bank at the upper end of town. San Pedro never saw such cool playing before. Porto was mad enough to shoot himself, for he thinks it a disgrace to be beaten by a woman. Her playing was fair, but shrewd, a run of luck which could not be checked with cold decks. After the game, which broke up about midnight, Belle Faro, as we had named her, went off with her winnings. A few days later Porto Banco also left, for the boys jeered him until he could stay no longer. Then a strange story came to my ears. It was this: After Belle Faro went off she was followed, that same night, mind you, by Porto and some of his cronies. They overtook her between here and the mountains. She was asked to give up her winnings, but she refused. High words followed, then there was a rush for her, and Mercedo Mort got a bullet through his neck. They caught Belle Faro, however, and proceeded to whip her. It was cruel, devilish mean for a lot of men. They tied the woman's hands to the saddle, and cut open her dress on the back. All at once Porto Banco, who wore a mask, uttered a cry, and pointed to Belle Faro's shoulders. What do you think they saw there, Cyclone?"

The once sport of Silver Deck shook his head, but there was a smile on his face.

"On her shoulder was a mark like the scar left by a branding-iron," continued Donald. "The man who saw it that night said it looked like a coiled serpent with a dagger between its jaws. Over the scar were two letters which he could not make out."

"Did they whip Belle Faro?" exclaimed Cyclone, sending the words out through his teeth.

"She told them to strike at the brand with their whips. She begged them to cut the scar out, and not to let up until the work was well done. But Porto Banco threw the whip down, and the woman was untied. He said that she had suffered enough from the brand, and when he asked her about it, she exclaimed that it was going to cost somebody his beauty, if not his life. They let her go, and since then until tonight, she has not been in San Pedro after dark."

"She never told me a word about this," muttered Cyclone.

"Then she can keep a secret," laughed Donald. "But the scar on her person? What do you know about it?"

"More than I intend to tell you, Captain Donald," was the response, as the eyes of the two sports met.

"She was a criminal once, and in a foreign country, for they don't burn people in America. Maybe she has been to the French prisons."

"She never saw one."

"Well, the brand is there, and there it will stay!" ejaculated Donald. "As I have said, you may find Belle Faro at Sancho's house. Sancho and his boy, the brat Juan, are her San Pedro allies."

Then Donald proceeded to tell Cyclone how to reach the place where he expected to find Coral, and almost before the last word had left his lips, the Silver Deck sport was off.

"Don't I know that a link of some kind connects him with that woman?" cried Donald the Dark, when he found himself alone in the celebrated private room which had witnessed more than one thrilling scene. "She never liked me because I was Major Mystery's friend. There is hatred and jealousy at the bottom of her game against the Russian. If I knew where the girl Medora is, I'd see that Belle Faro never finds her."

Meantime, Cyclone was on his way to Sancho's house.

He had come to San Pedro a little too late to find Colonel Redpath, but he would not be too late to keep Coral from the trail.

He found the house without difficulty, and the next moment his knuckles were at the door. Sancho opened it in person, and his eyes grew large when they took in the figure of Cyclone.

"I have a message for Belle Faro," the sport said, stepping into the house.

Sancho gave him a cautious and searching look.

"Let me have it," he went on, extending his hand.

Cyclone drew back and laughed.

"Do they deliver messages of importance to outside parties in San Pedro?" ejaculated Cyclone.

"Belle Faro cannot receive yours."

"Why not?"

"Because she is gone."

"Too late again!" exclaimed the Colorado sport. "This has been my luck through life."

Then he took a quick step toward Sancho whom he touched significantly as he looked into his eyes.

"Belle Faro was looking for me, Sancho," he said. "The event which took place in San Pedro awhile ago was hurried up by the man who took Major Mystery off. I was to be here to help Belle Faro. I must find her. That is my message. Now, where is she, Captain Sancho?"

The old San Pedroan was not to be taken in by any chaff of this kind. He seemed to see that Coral would fare better if the man was not near. She had left no word for him, therefore she was not looking for him in San Pedro. Sancho held his tongue and gave Cyclone looks which maddened him.

"You don't want me to assist Belle Faro," cried Cyclone.

"It is not that," was the answer. "I don't know where she is."

"Liar!" roared the Silver Deck sport, out of humor at the old fellow, and chagrined over the time he was losing. "You ought to be shaken out of your boots!"

"Mebbe the captain wants to try it?" cried Sancho, and a moment later he jerked loose from Cyclone, and laughed derisively till his parchment-colored face looked like an imp's.

"No! I wouldn't soil my hands with you!" And Cyclone strode to the door. "You and your boy can keep all the little secrets you hold."

Sancho was still showing his teeth when Cyclone rushed out, and turned in a rage toward the plaza.

"Curse this town and its people!" he exclaimed, unable to keep back his anger. "I don't care what becomes of Colonel Redpath and

Coral. Let them fight it out. She will never accomplish her revenge because the count has dropped into the hands of Captain Coldgrip, and he has too much at stake to let her get at the Palace Scorpion. For a dollar, I'd go to 'Frisco and begin anew."

"What has crossed you, Cyclone?" asked a voice, as a man who had been watching the Colorado sport stepped forward and peered into his face.

Cyclone looked once, and with a slight start held out his hand.

"Will you shake with me, Mark Million?" he asked. "I haven't seen you since you sent Natty Nick to his long account on the jumping-grounds of Yellow Jacket. What is on the programme now?"

The man whom Cyclone addressed was the late boss of Silver Deck, seen last by the reader when he left Broncho Buck, alias Natty Nick, dead in the jumping-park.

He took the extended hand, and looked for a moment into its owner's eyes.

"It is time for you to cut loose from Colonel Redpath, the Russian sleuth and assassin," he said. "Captain Coldgrip will assuredly turn on you for the shot in the suburbs of Silver Deck, if you persist in helping this rascal. Stand in with me, and all will be well. I have just come to San Pedro, but I have not been idle. Colonel Redpath had more friends here than Donald of the Paradiso ranch. He made fifty enemies when he marched the Russian through the saloon and carried him off. In a certain house in this town, within the past few minutes, a number of men, desperadoes all, have sworn to follow Captain Claude, and to rescue his prisoner at all hazard. You can't forget, Cyclone, that the woman he marked for life with a hot iron was once your wife. You ought to help throw Colonel Redpath into her hands, or to let New York justice receive him from the clutches of Claude Coldgrip."

Cyclone let slip an oath.

"I am with you, Captain Mark!" he cried. "The foreign ferret has lost an ally and gained a foe!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FOE IN THE REAR.

"It has been a long trail, captain."

"And a busy one."

"The end is not yet. I give you fair warning."

"Thank you, colonel."

The two men who exchanged words like these were riding across the valley that held San Pedro.

The California town with its mixed population was at their backs, and its lights had already faded out.

Need it be said here that the horsemen were Captain Coldgrip and his prisoner?

The time was a little while after the successful catch we have already witnessed.

The men were riding in a southwesterly direction, and the trail was well defined and easily distinguished in the night.

The two horses kept close together, and the black cord that extended from Colonel Redpath's body to his captor's saddle was not taut.

"The girl, Medora, is still an unwilling prisoner, is she not, colonel?" suddenly continued the detective.

"The girl you are yet to find!" was the quick reply, and then the Russian laughed. "They tell me, Captain Claude, that you promised Grant Thurston to find her?"

"I did, and I will!" declared the sleuth. "The game is not at an end, colonel. If you think Medora's mountain prison is unknown to every one in San Pedro, you are greatly mistaken."

Colonel Redpath gave Coldgrip a look of amazement.

"You have been tracked from San Pedro to the girl by a person who offered to lead me to the spot," continued Captain Claude, as the Russian's astonishment increased. "But just then I was after larger game. The mountain cage will yet give up its bird."

"Not for you, captain! Not for the American sleuth-hound who has followed me across the New World!"

"We shall see."

On, on across the valley rode the two men, hunter and hunted, under the myriad stars that glittered in the vault of heaven.

All at once both caught the sound of an approaching horse. The neigh was between them and San Pedro.

A score of thoughts chased one another through the Russian's brain.

Who was behind them?—Donald, the Dark, or was it a band of California toughs bent on depriving Captain Coldgrip of the fruits of his victory?

The detective had heard the sound, as Colonel Redpath could see by his countenance, but the horses kept on as if no person was in the rear.

The Scorpion of the Palace kept on the alert.

The horse behind them was certainly on the trail. The neigh was not repeated, and neither of the steeds in advance had answered it.

Here and there through the valley grew clumps of trees and cacti. About these were

dark shadows that extended some distance, and in them one could not be seen.

At length, when the New York sleuth and his prisoner reached one of these clumps, the two bosses came to a halt.

Captain Coldgrip turned in the saddle and looked back. He was watching for the trailer in his rear. The unknown quantity was engaging his attention, for with the Russian "elephant" on his hands, he could not afford to be followed by a secret foe.

For some minutes the two men saw nothing, but in the end a dark object evolved itself from the starlight and halted some distance from the cacti clump.

Captain Coldgrip leaned forward and watched it intently for some moments.

He saw that he had been followed by a single steed, whose rider was discernible, but of course he could make out nothing but the outlines.

Colonel Redpath observed the statue on the trail with a curiosity equal to the Atlantic sleuth's. There was a gleam of hope in his eyes, and his breath went in gasps of suppressed excitement.

Now and then he looked toward Captain Claude, who never took his eyes from the stranger. He saw a cocked revolver in the detective's hand, and then he would try to calculate the distance between them and the trailer.

It was plain to Captain Coldgrip that the individual whom he watched believed that the shadows of the cacti concealed the people he had been following.

If not, why did he not approach?

All at once the revolver of the detective went up, and was pushed forward over the head of his steed.

"He is going to try his hand!" mentally exclaimed Colonel Redpath. "Captain Claude believes that the trailer is within pistol-shot."

"What do you say, colonel?" whispered the New York sleuth, turning to his prisoner. "Can I hit the fellow out yonder?"

"This distance is deceptive," was the reply. "Besides, Captain Claude, you don't know whom you are firing at."

The revolver was lowered, and a smile parted the American detective's lips.

"I might unseat a friend of yours, eh, colonel?" he laughed.

"I'm not afraid of that, for I think I rode friendless from San Pedro."

"Let the fellow go," and Captain Coldgrip picked up the lines again. "We will try him a little further, count."

The following moment the two horses had left the cacti, and moved over the valley trail as it was defined beyond.

"He has left his place," cried the American.

"He rides while we ride, and rests his horse when we draw rein. I like an accommodating fellow like that."

For some time no particular notice was taken of the solitary rider; but occasional glances backward showed that he was still on the trail.

"Let him have his way," thought Captain Coldgrip. "The time will come for him to show his hand if he intends to play one for the colonel, and that is undoubtedly his mission."

Colonel Redpath saw the valley lengthening behind them, and the mountains rising before seemed to suggest escape from the human sleuth-hound who had won the last play. But the rope which he could not break, and the thongs that secured his limbs to his steed's sides were the irons that galled him.

In the mountains the cacti clumps disappeared, and the trees in some places hid the gleams of the stars.

"Are we near Medora?" asked the New York detective, leaning toward the Russian at a certain part of the trail.

"Am I a fool?" was the quick response.

Captain Coldgrip replied with a light laugh.

"You are not clever at all, colonel," he said. "I presume you would not locate Medora's whereabouts for a knife at your ropes."

"Try me!" exclaimed the Russian, a flash instantly lighting up his eyes.

The New York detective returned a look which told the foreign sleuth that the banter meant nothing serious.

"You can't buy my secret, sir," abruptly resumed Colonel Redpath. "I wish to tell you here, Captain Coldgrip, that if I go back to the States with you or anybody else, Grant Thurston, the Siberian exile, will never see his child alive!"

The countenance of the Russian exhibited the passion in which his words were spoken. They came through his teeth like the hiss of a serpent, and straightening in his saddle, he threw a glance back as if he at that moment invited a charge by the persistent trailer in the rear.

The road among the mountains was not sinuous, like such trails often are. It led almost direct across the range to War Eagle, a small town on the Southern Pacific.

Captain Coldgrip seemed in no hurry.

He probably knew the train schedule posted in the depot at War Eagle, and was timing himself to reach the town just in time to take a certain train.

The Russian had never been to War Eagle consequently he had no ally there. The town doubtless had a "boss," as all wild Western towns have, but he was as likely to favor the hunter as the hunted.

Down the mountain, with the gray of the new morning not far away, rode Captain Coldgrip and his catch.

The footfalls in the rear had ceased, and the keenest eyes no longer discovered the rider seen first from the shadow of the cañon.

There was no glow of victory on the Yankee spotter's cheeks.

The long night had passed in sleepless watchfulness, and his nerves felt the strain.

For all this, his eyes were bright, and he filled the saddle with no show of fatigue.

Colonel Redpath was also "fresh," but the silent excitement that filled his brain had kept him so.

His chance had not yet come, but he had by no means let his spirits droop.

War Eagle was not looking for the two men who were riding toward it from the mountains.

The few cabins that comprised the town showed no signs of life, and the rather substantial building that stood alongside the track, and by courtesy called a depot, was closed and apparently abandoned.

Day was breaking when the night riders emerged from the pass near War Eagle, and rode slowly into the place.

Captain Coldgrip looked around, but saw nobody.

"Do you know this town, colonel?" he asked, glancing at his prisoner.

"It must be War Eagle," was the answer.

"War Eagle it is. We can take the train here for either ocean. Have you a choice?"

In an instant a smile came to the Russian's lips.

"I wouldn't toss up a dollar for preference!" he exclaimed. "Besides, if I wanted to go to Frisco you'd select New York, so why need I take any interest in the matter?"

By this time the couple had reached the heart of the town, and a cabin door opening near by revealed a young man half-dressed, and pale.

"Hello!" he cried, seeing the two horsemen.

"Do you want the train west?"

"The 'Frisco train," answered Captain Claude.

"It can't come any too soon for you, I guess," replied the young man with a ghostly smile.

"We're in the grip of death here. I'm the only man in War Eagle able to stand up this morning."

"What is the matter?"

"Heaven knows, for no living man does! A disease that kills as certain as strychnine struck War Eagle a week ago. I guess the Almighty holds a grudge against the town—I don't know what else. I'll hang the flag out for you at the depot, but they won't take you aboard unless you swear you don't live here. Ho! I see! And the young man's eyes became riveted on the cord that united Colonel Redpath to his captor.

He went back into the cabin, got his hat, and walked ahead of the horses with an unsteady step.

"There, sir!" he remarked, turning to Captain Coldgrip when he had put out the train signal. "You won't have more than ten minutes to wait if they're on time. I can't give you any information. The operator is lying in the depot dead, and there isn't another in War Eagle.

"I can telegraph," answered the Yankee sleuth, guiding the horses up to the door.

"Call up Needles and see if they're on time. If this man is a prisoner, I'll watch him for you."

Captain Claude slipped from the saddle and put a revolver in the hands of the young man, who leaned against the building and began to watch the Russian.

The New York detective walked into the office and went to the instrument.

As he bent over it he heard the sentinel utter a loud cry, and then saw his white face at the portal.

"My God, captain! The woman has rescued your prisoner!" he announced.

The next instant Captain Coldgrip was at the door. His horse was there and none other, and a black rope hung alongside the saddle!

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE TIGRESS AND HER PREY.

LIKE a flash the startling truth broke upon the New York spotter's mind.

"The woman" was Coral, and her sudden swoop explained the mysterious trailer in the rear.

Captain Coldgrip dismissed all thoughts of his intended dispatch, and of the train for San Francisco.

The young man of War Eagle had not recovered from the excitement produced by the rescue, and when the detective, seated in the saddle, turned to him for information, he found him gasping like a dying man for breath.

"Which way did she go?" demanded Captain Claude.

"Up the street toward the shanties. Great Jove! she came when I wasn't looking for any-

body, cut the rope, thrust a revolver into my face, and was off with her friend!"

The sleuth did not wait to hear the last words, but dashed away leaving the youth alone.

The cabins of War Eagle lay, for the most part, between the depot and the mountains out of which the captain had just brought his prisoner in safety. A trail, it could not be called a street, ran through the town and lost itself among the hills.

Captain Coldgrip rode forward, keeping the trail and urging his steed to his greatest speed.

Coral had warned him to look out for her in the hour of victory, and her sudden attack proved that she had not spoken in vain.

When the American detective reached the last shanty at the base of the mountains, he saw nothing.

The few moments he had lost between Coral's onset and his pursuit had been of inestimable value to her.

In the interval she had been enabled to disappear with her prisoner.

Captain Claude plunged into the mountains, and drew rein some distance beyond the shanties of War Eagle.

He could hear nothing of Coral, and the several trails, either of which she could have taken, revealed nothing that gave him hope.

Chagrined, but not without hope, the Atlantic sleuth rode back to War Eagle.

"It was the leap of a tigress," he exclaimed. "She must have guessed my destination and reached War Eagle ahead of me. Ah! Coral, one of these days you will find Captain Coldgrip with a hand you can never trump!"

Meanwhile, two horses were moving deeper into the mountains.

A woman who sat in one of the saddles held a black rope in one hand, and every now and then her eye wandered to her companion with a glance of undisguised triumph.

Colonel Redpath had been dazed by the swift rescue, and it was some time before he recovered, and then the cabins of the plague-smitten town had been left behind.

Coral was the last person he expected to see, and when she dashed up to the depot and severed the lariat which united him to the Yankee sleuth he could hardly credit the evidence of sight.

Bound in the saddle as he was, with his hands secured, he could not strike for himself against the avenging angel who had rescued him for a purpose of her own.

"I've got to bide my time and it will come," thought the Russian. "This woman in her madness will make a fatal mistake, and I will be swift to take advantage of it. I am rid of Captain Coldgrip, and that is excellent. By Jupiter! I ought to thank Coral for her interference."

He looked at the woman and their eyes met.

"I owe you my thanks," he said, smiling, but with ill-concealed irony. "You have taken me from the American spotter who was about to force me to take a journey which might not have been a pleasant one. Now, Coral, if you will release the hands of an old acquaintance, I will relieve you of the rope you hold to keep the horses together."

Coral's eyes sparkled.

"I will cut you loose when the time comes," she cried. "Just now, Count Paul, I prefer to have you in bonds. No thanks for my little play. The captain was not looking for it, and I'm afraid I've forfeited his friendship, but never mind."

Colonel Redpath's irony instantly vanished.

"You have hunted me during the past two months!" he cried. "Ever since Captain Mark Million exiled you from Silver Deck, you have tried to meet me. I have heard of you in various places; but you were always a little too late."

"Every time but the last one!" laughed Coral. "This time I did not fail. Perhaps you wish I had been more than branded in Russia."

"Oho! it is that old affair, is it, woman?" cried the foreign ferret. "I begin to see the motif that impels you."

"Where have your thoughts been all this while?" was the answer. "You did not think I had forgotten that indignity which heats my blood whenever I think of it! Ah! Count Paul, I thought you had a better memory than that."

The Russian did not reply for a moment.

"You give me all the credit, I see," he smiled at last.

"Every particle of it!"

"You never thought that the approval came from your husband?"

"From Cyclone?" vociferated Coral, starting back, "you want to shift the infamy from your own shoulders, but you can't do that. Cyclone was my husband then."

"And the lover of a banished princess," laughed the Russian, derisively. "You never discovered, Coral, that he divided his smiles between two St. Petersburg houis, yourself and the Princess Narva. When, after Grant Thurston's sentence to Siberia, it was resolved to brand you," Cyclone laughed and thought of his princess.

Coral's eyes seemed on fire.

"You tell me this for a purpose!" she exclaimed. "It is a pretty invention of your own,

Count Paul. You Russian sleuth-hounds grow up in cunning, and you graduated in infamy long ago."

"Think as you please," was the answer. "Make a saint of Cyclone. Why, when I got to Silver Deck, he came back from Leadville, as you know. Coral, as they call you here, you would doubtless like to pay me for the Russian branding."

"That is what I shall do!" flashed the woman.

A laugh burst from Colonel Redpath's throat.

"Where is your forge and where the branding iron?" he cried.

"Haven't you better use the dagger?"

"I don't want your life. I shall not draw a drop of your blood!"

"A pound of flesh, but no blood, eh?"

"Mark for mark!" and Coral leaned toward the Russian and looked him in the face.

The horses were moving slowly through a high walled pass, and almost touched one another.

"You say I have not the fatal brand, the coiled serpent with the dagger between its teeth, and the letters which, in Russian, stand for 'common thief' above it! What became of the branding iron after it marked me, Count Paul?"

The Russian shook his head.

"It is nearer than you think," Coral went on.

"It has been ready for its victim these many days, although it never fell into my hands till a little while ago. No forge at my service in the mountains! Ah! there are places in America to which you have never penetrated. I am familiar with this country to which the branding iron banished me. You found me in Silver Deck, and your coming was the means of exiling me from the only place where I have seen a happy day since quitting Russia. It was a strange fate that brought us together again in the heart of the American continent. The fortune that guided you to Medora Thurston, brought you to me also. Time is an avenger, Count Paul. The mills of God grind slowly, but they never stop!"

During this speech the Russian looked into Coral's eyes with the haughtiness that seemed to make arrows of her words as she proceeded.

He had succeeded in rousing his beautiful captor, but he could not bring about the blunder he was playing deeply for.

Coral ceased suddenly, and looked away.

"Is that all?" asked Colonel Redpath, through his teeth.

"No! The end is to come yet."

"A woman's end! Then, why don't you bring it about?"

"Have a little patience!" smiled Coral. "The last play is not far away, count, and Captain Coldgrip will not make it either."

Almost suddenly the two came upon an opening, and in the midst of it three shanties.

Colonel Redpath gave Coral a quick look.

The cabins were a mutual surprise. Coral looked as startled as if she had found a city among the hills.

Against one of the shanties sat a man dressed in dirty gray, with long hair and beard. He gave a peculiar sound between a whistle and a cry when he saw the two riders, and almost immediately two other men, counterparts of himself, rushed out of the adjoining huts.

It was too late for Coral to draw back with her prisoner, so she rode on, waited for by the trio, breathless and full of curiosity.

"Who are you?" demanded one of the mountaineers, as the two horses came to a halt in front of the group.

"We are people going further than this," replied Coral.

"She talks like our old Queen Sybil used ter!" exclaimed the tough. "And look at the captain thar! By Jericho! he ar' tied."

A thrill passed through the Russian as all three stepped forward with eyes fixed on the lariat bonds.

Coral quietly touched a six shooter, and looked sternly into the swarthy faces of the three.

"This man belongs to me," she continued.

"Is that so, cap'n?"

"That is what she says," declared Colonel Redpath, with a mute appeal for help which the most unobserving could not fail to see.

"Did she, a woman, tie yer, Cap?" grinned one of the men.

"By heavens! she did not!" cried the Russian.

"What did he do?"

The question was asked by the man who had first addressed Coral, and he now stood at her horse's head, and was looking up into her face.

"He had a red hot iron put to my flesh!" cried Coral. "He marked me, a woman, for life, and sent me out into the world everlastingly disgraced."

"How's that, captain?"

"She is marked for life!" laughed Colonel Redpath. "Gentlemen, what is your opinion of a woman who would swear away the happiness of a child?"

A flush of anger and indignation colored Coral's temples.

"I did that!" she went on, with a withering glance at Colonel Redpath ere she turned to the mountain men. "I perjured myself at that monster's instigation; but God knows that I am willing to right the wrong. He paid me for my

work with a burning iron on my back. That man is Count Paul Demidoff, once the paid spy of the Russian czar."

One of the men wheeled upon the Muscovite giant.

"I am a Russian!" he said. "I was forced to fly from my country by the machinations of Alexander's police. I was a suspect, a Nihilist, so called. The man who persecuted me so was Lieutenant Luvor."

"The officer under this man!" exclaimed Coral, with a look at the colonel.

"Then, by the eternal heavens! I hate you, Count Demidoff!" was the response. "What are you going to do with this man, madam?"

A wild thought had sprung into existence in Coral's brain.

"I want to give him mark for mark!" she exclaimed. "Lend me a little fire, and I will pay the Russian Scorpion for the sting he inflicted across the sea. The brand is in my possession, and I want to see it burned into his cheeks!"

Colonel Redpath uttered a loud cry, and looked at the mountain men.

He read no sympathy in their faces.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BACK TO SAN PEDRO.

FOUR days after Captain Coldgrip's disappearance from San Pedro with the Russian ferret, a boy crossed the plaza of the valley town with a quick step and vanished beyond the porch of the Valley Rose.

He ascended to the second floor without checking his gait, and entered a room at whose solitary window a young man sat anxious and careworn.

The face of the youth brightened at the sight of the boy, but almost immediately the expression of pleasure faded out.

"The bird is gone," reported the boy, who was Juan, Sancho's son.

"Gone!" echoed the young man. "What does it mean, Juan?"

The boy shook his head.

"She was there when you were last to the mountains?"

"Yes."

"Can Colonel Redpath have turned the tables on Captain Coldgrip?" was the answering exclamation.

"Some lady has been to the mountain retreat. Medora, as you call the Russian's prisoner, is no longer where I saw her as his captive."

"Could you find no trail?"

"No trail."

"She may have escaped! The location of San Pedro is unknown to her. I don't want to think that Paul Demidoff has vanquished the man who has hunted him across the continent. Let me believe this, Juan, and I will count the minutes to my healing."

"Will you trail him, Senor Mortimer?"

"Won't I?" cried the young man, his eyes lighting up with enthusiasm. "I am the person who put Captain Claude onto the Russian's trail. I am Ralph Romaine's son, and it was the hand of Colonel Redpath that orphaned me! What news of the two men who were watching the movements of the band that swore to follow the captain, and to rescue the rascally Russian from his hands?"

"They have not come back," replied the boy. "From your description, those men were Cyclone and Mark Million, but I don't see what should make them friends. Keep your eyes open, Juan. I must trust a good deal to you. How tired I am of this place! Donald the Dark seems to have gone back on the colonel."

"You don't want to trust that sun-lizard!" exclaimed the boy.

"He will smile when he is feeling the edge of his knife. I don't half believe what he says about Colonel Redpath now, for not five days ago he was willing to slit a throat for the big Russian. Donald is shrewd and full of Mexican meanness, which they say he got from his father. I know the San Pedro fox!"

"Coral keeps away, too," observed Mortimer, looking out of the window upon the plaza where the shadows of night were falling about the fountain and its big leaved plants.

"She went off like a bombshell!" laughed the boy. "When she heard that Captain Coldgrip had taken the colonel, she called for her horse, and six men couldn't have kept her back. The captain had the start, but Coral, who is Belle Faro to us, you know, had an excellent horse that knew her hand. We will have to wait," finished Juan. "It will not be long. I am going back to the mountain to-night, for I don't want to give Medora up."

More than once since Captain Coldgrip had left him in care of the landlord of the plaza hotel, Mortimer had been visited by Juan.

The young man who had been lured from San Francisco to be stabbed by Colonel Redpath, was progressing finely.

The toughs of San Pedro offered him no indignities, and even the wily Donald had called to announce in his oily tongue that he had cut loose from the Russian, whose acquaintance he had been "without a knowledge of the man."

Mortimer was not inclined to put much faith in Donald's words.

In Western phraseology, the proprietor of El Paradiso was "a liar from the ground up," and Ignace had posted his guest about the man.

The band of San Pedro toughs who had resolved to rescue Colonel Redpath from his captor, had been watched from the start by Captain Million and Cyclone, and when they left San Pedro well mounted, the two former citizens of Silver Deck were not far away.

The mystery that most interested the young invalid at the Valley Rose, was the vanishing of Medora Thurston, Colonel Redpath's prisoner.

Juan, the boy, who had discovered her prison by following the Russian to it, had visited it after Captain Coldgrip's coup; but the bird was gone, and, what was stranger still, there was no trail.

What had become of Medora?

Mortimer did not want to believe that the Russian sleuth had outwitted his captor, had come back, and removed the girl.

Juan, who declared that she could not escape unaided, almost forced him to this conclusion.

It was torture for him to lie cooped up in San Pedro while some startling events in which he was interested were transpiring around him.

Juan was his main medium of communication with the outer world, and the boy was shrewd, active and reliable.

Let us go back to the night on which occurred the meeting of Juan and Mortimer at the hotel.

The San Pedro boy left the young American with a promise that he would subject Medora's prison and the vicinity to a close search on the following day.

Mortimer heard the boy's footsteps die away, and saw his agile little figure glide across the plaza.

Night soon became fixed over the town.

The young man did not go back to the cot which seemed to gall him whenever he touched it. He wanted to be away from San Pedro, and whenever he thought of Captain Coldgrip's absence, and what might occasion it, he longed to take the fatal trail himself.

Ignace, the landlord, stole up-stairs as was his wont, and listened at Mortimer's door.

The youth, still at the window with the warm night air on his cheeks, made no response calculated to draw the querulous fellow into the room, and Ignace went back on tip-toe, believing his guest asleep.

San Pedro grew still about the plaza.

Down at El Paradiso a noisy crowd lost money, and bought the vile liquors sold across the counter by Jose. Ignace never had such customers.

All at once Mortimer's attention was called to a figure at the fountain.

He saw it because the lamp at the hotel porch was burning brighter than usual, and at the moment he happened to be looking at the silver spray among the plants.

The figure was seen but for a moment. It vanished among the trees, and Mortimer saw it no more.

After awhile the gallop of a horse came to his ears through the open window. He knew that it was in the suburbs of San Pedro, but the sound suddenly grew still.

Twenty minutes later a figure moved across the plaza toward the hotel.

"It is the horseman!" passed through Mortimer's mind, and then he watched the individual below, holding his breath from excitement while he came forward, and eager to see him in the light of Ignace's lamp.

"Great Jove! the man is Coldgrip!" burst from Mortimer's throat. "He has come back alive, thank Heaven! though empty-handed."

And then he watched the man walking toward the hotel.

Presently the new-comer vanished, then Mortimer heard his boots on the porch, and turned his face to the door, eager for the meeting.

As the latch clicked he rose and started forward. The next moment he stood face to face with Captain Claude.

"My boy! on your pins again!" exclaimed the New York sleuth. "This is better than I expected."

"To see you alive is worth all my waiting," was the answer, and then Mortimer spoke the words that bubbled without effort to his lips.

"Where is our man?"

A singular light appeared at once in the tireless detective's eyes.

"You are very anxious, I see, Mortimer," he replied with a smile. "I am back alone, without the object of our chase across the continent."

"But you took him away from San Pedro! You caught him at El Paradiso."

"I did both, but the female eagle swooped upon us at War Eagle camp, and I was robbed."

"It was Coral!" cried the young man. "Juan said she followed you the same night. Oh! if I had had strength enough to follow her! Is the hunt over, Captain Claude? Does your presence here, empty handed, tell me that we are to go back without success?"

"Why do you think thus? I have said nothing of final defeat."

"But Coral robbed you! She rescued Colonel Redpath to pay an old debt."

"Which she did not get to settle," smiled Captain Coldgrip.

"Why not?"

"The victim escaped just as Coral's branding iron was about to touch his cheeks."

"That was her vengeance, then!"

"Yes; red hot steel in America for the same thing in Russia!"

"Fortune favored the villain at the last moment," observed Mortimer.

"And a madder woman never saw a foe escape than Coral," was the response. "She found a mountain furnace when she was expecting nothing of the kind, but from the hissing, spluttering brand the colonel recoiled and tried his famous powers, which in the empire of strong men are deemed remarkable. He scattered Coral's assistants like chaff, and before the little group recovered, he was out of sight."

"Once more at large!" cried Mortimer madly. "Captain, in heaven's name, when is this trail to end?"

"Sooner than you think, my boy," answered the American sleuth. "I am on it now."

"And in San Pedro?"

"In San Pedro."

"Does the trail carry you back to this place?"

"I am here at any rate," was the evasive reply, and then the detective went to the window and looked for several moments toward the fountain.

"The San Pedro toughs who took it into their heads to follow me, struck the wrong trail," he resumed, wheeling suddenly upon Mortimer intently watching him. "They quarreled among themselves in the mountains, and the whole thing ended in a pistol matinee which broke up the chase. Colonel Redpath's trail comes back to San Pedro. Coral is still after him with the branding iron, and, if she gets the chance, she will spoil his beauty."

"We must watch for her. You know what she can do, captain."

A smile broke at the corners of the American detective's mouth.

"She is a veritable tigress," he said. "She has added a new clause to her oath."

"What is that?"

"She will shoot Colonel Redpath from our hands, and brand him afterward!"

"Not while I live to prevent!" cried Mortimer. "I don't care what that man did in Russia; I want him for the crime that made me fatherless. Are you certain that the skulking foe is not in San Pedro to-night? Just before you crossed the plaza, I saw a figure at the pool."

"Donald, perhaps," was the response.

At that moment the door of Sancho's house was opened, and the person who glided in grasped the San Pedroan's arm before he could speak.

"I am back! I had him, but he gave me the slip. Where is your boy, Juan?"

"He won't be here any more to-night. Medora has escaped, and he has gone back to the mountains to look for her. He just started."

"That is good! He won't be here to bother me. Now, Sancho, let me rest here till I catch my breath for the final stroke. My enemy has come to San Pedro; back to Donald, his old ally. Captain Coldgrip has just crossed the plaza. He does not know that the Palace Scorpion is here. Is there a back entrance to El Paradiso?"

"No," answered Sancho.

"Then, by the front way!" said Coral through her teeth. "Fate and death have brought me back!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE VEST OF STEEL.

IF "fate and death" had brought Coral back to the town in the valley, something of a like nature had prompted Colonel Redpath's return.

Captain Coldgrip's brief narrative of the Russian's escape from the branding-iron could convey to Mortimer only a faint impression of the exciting scene.

Coral had lost her prisoner in the manner described, and that despite the assistance of the three mountaineers with whom we left her in a previous chapter.

In the succeeding interval, she had rediscovered the colonel's tracks, and her presence in San Pedro was proof enough that the wily Russian was not far off.

Let us see.

A short time before Coral's unexpected return to Sancho's house, Donald the Dark was startled by the appearance at El Paradiso of Colonel Redpath.

He had seen the Muscovite captured and marched off by the cool head who had followed him across a continent, but now he was back, and with a flash of victory in his eyes.

Donald knew nothing about Coral's trail, nothing about her Cossack-like swoop at the depot in War Eagle, and, of course, nothing concerning the Russian's escape from the woman's vengeance.

"I am out of the claws of lioness and lion!" cried Count Demidoff, as he swallowed a glass of liquor in the famous private room at the end of the bar.

"They don't hold me long, Captain Donald."

The proprietor of El Paradiso was on hand with a lot of eager questions, but the colonel brushed them all aside.

"I did not come back to stay," he broke in on Donald's interrogatives. "The girl—my bird—has brought me back."

"The bird of the mountain cage?"

"Yes. Medora is the girl."

Donald gave utterance to an exclamation of surprise.

"I found the cage empty when I got there," continued the Russian. "It was not wholly a surprise, for Captain Coldgrip told me that the retreat had been discovered by some one. What do you know, Donald?"

The boss of San Pedro shook his head.

"You know nothing, eh?"

"Nothing, Major Mystery. I have not left San Pedro since your going away. If the mountain cage is empty, I did not know it."

"I go back to the trail," said the colonel, madly. "I don't care if a thousand Captain Coldgrips are at my heels. I followed the exiles from Russia; I lost them in New York to see them in Colorado, after a long hunt. The girl insulted my love in the dominion of the czar, and the father got Siberia for laughing at it. I will find Medora. The woman called Coral may throw her branding-iron into the fire. It will never touch the flesh of Count Demidoff. How is the boy—the fly that came to my net from Frisco?"

"Almost well," answered Donald.

"My knife did not do its work, but then I had to strike over his arm. The next time, if he comes to me—the next time, Captain Donald, there will be no failure!"

"Mortimer is waiting for Captain Coldgrip. He promised to come back some time."

"When he had placed me behind bars," laughed the Russian sleuth. "I'd give out half of my Russian wealth if he would enter yon door," and the colonel drew a revolver and covered the portal with steady aim.

"Coral will give the American sleuth enough to do," he went on. "He will have to watch her while he looks after me, for, from what she has already done, she is liable to come between at any time. She had the face of a fury while she stood before me in the mountains with the infernal iron glowing like her eyes. And when I scattered the three toughs and rode off, I heard a cry and saw Coral reel away like a person hot through the brain. In Russia she was a woman of spirit, but here she is queen of hate."

Donald the Dark went to the door and opened it, to see the face of Jose, his bartender.

A few whispered words passed between the two men, and the owner of El Paradiso came back to the anxious Russian.

"A batch of bad news from Jose," reported Donald.

"What is it?"

"Belle Faro is back."

"Coral!" cried the colonel.

"That is not all. There is a man with Mortimer at the Valley Rose."

"My old hunter!" came through the Russian's teeth.

"Yes," nodded Donald, "Captain Coldgrip is once more in San Pedro."

For several minutes there was no reply.

The Scorpion of the Palace seemed to be weighing his chances with the stern hunters who had run the quarry down, and Donald watched him intently, but without a word.

"If they can, they will end the game in San Pedro," Colonel Redpath said at last. "That is the play. But look here, Donald. The fox is going to give his hounds the slip. With Medora at large, I am not ready to face them. I thought I made no trail in coming to San Pedro, but never mind. Baffle this American ferret long if you can. Where are they? Did Jose say?"

"Captain Coldgrip is with Mortimer, or was a while ago; Belle Faro can be found at her old quarters."

"Which is Sancho's house?"

"Yes, major."

"Nothing would give me more delight than to announce to these two trackers that the game is gone. Donald, you will help me?"

"Name the service," replied the San Pedroan, with a show of nervousness, for, to tell the truth, Donald the Dark wanted no more conflicts with the Atlantic detective.

His experience with Captain Claude was quite enough to last him a lifetime, and he wanted to make money uninterrupted in the valley capital.

"The service I require at your hands is simply this, Donald," returned the Russian. "I will go at once from San Pedro. When I have left the town you will find Coral and deliver a message I shall leave for her."

"Captain Coldgrip will be served in the same manner. I want the hawks to know that the partridge has left cover, and that under their very eyes. Will you do this, Donald?"

"With promptness, major," answered the gambler.

Colonel Redpath, or Major Mystery, as he was called in San Pedro, took a note book from his bosom, and tore out two leaves.

Across one page he wrote in large letters the words: *The fox is at large again!* and underneath the sentence signed his two names, Paul Demidoff and Colonel Redpath.

Folding the messages he placed them in Donald's hands, and looked at his watch.

"You can deliver those notes at the expiration of ten minutes," he said. "I am going to lead Captain Coldgrip and Coral out upon the last quarter of the trail. I am tired of this persistent hunt. There was a time when I liked the excitement I found in it, but I want rest. I see that if this New York sleuth is not baffled and finished soon, he will finally triumph."

"And the woman, too, eh, major?"

"Hang the woman!" grated the Russian. "I tell you ere I go, Donald, that when I come back to San Pedro, the hunt will be over, and I will not have to look for a shadow nor listen for a step."

"There is the boy," suggested Donald.

"He won't bother me a moment," was the quick retort.

"Did you—"

Donald stopped as if he was on forbidden ground, and his eyes dropped under the colonel's look.

"What if I did?" cried the Russian. "Mortimer took a vow to run me down with the assistance of Captain Coldgrip because his father was found dead in his library more than a year ago. That is what the Atlantic sleuth-hound calls my American crime! Conscience never bothers you much, Captain Donald." And the colonel laughed in the San Pedroan's face.

"If you were in a house at night looking for an important paper and a man should confront you suddenly, you would not tell him to hand you over to the police?"

The little eyes of Donald snapped vigorously. Once before he had laughed in his captor's face. Now he put on a different air.

"Don't you know that the game is mine in spite of your play?" he said, boldly.

At the same time he threw a glance to where he had left Donald, but the yellow boss of El Paradiso had slipped away with the stealth of a mountain cat.

"It shall not be a ride to War Eagle this time," spoke the American detective.

"I should think not. There might be another swoop at the depot!"

The following moment two men came upon the scene.

Colonel Redpath looked once at them and started.

"I see you have found him, captain," exclaimed one of the couple.

"For the fourth time," was the answer. "The colonel is one of those who submit quietly to fate, and we will get along without trouble."

"Give me a chance!" thought the Russian, as his eyes lit up with angry flashes. "It is a long distance to New York, Captain Claude, and you may never see the billows of the Atlantic."

"The alarm has already been given," announced one of the men who had come up. "Some one has carried the news to El Paradiso, and the ranch is emptying itself."

The New York spotter glanced toward Donald's famous resort.

"Put your pistols at this man's head," he said to Mark Million and Cyclone. "Follow me down the street there. The game must be played out here before we get away."

Captain Coldgrip stepped in front of Colonel Redpath, at whose head two heavy six-shooters were placed, and walked toward Donald's ranch.

The establishment was not far away, and he had not advanced a dozen strides before he found himself fronting a lot of men whose very aspect was an index to their natures.

The crowd had rushed pell-mell from El Paradiso at Jose's report.

They could hardly believe that Captain Coldgrip had come back, and, for the second time, captured Major Mystery.

But when they saw him standing coolly before them, in the light of the reflector fixed over the ranch door, they no longer doubted the bartender's story.

Men drew back and looked at the detective, but there were some whose potations suggested a charge straight at the enemy. And straight at the level-headed sleuth at that moment meant some of the maddest pistol work San Pedro had ever seen, or was likely to see.

"I'm for calling this a draw, captain," cried Donald, and his wiry figure and serpent eyes were seen as he stepped forward. "San Pedro never interferes with a stranger's business, and yours seems to be catching the major thar for a crime he committed in New York. If the boys understood the case, we'd like the game to be a draw."

At the corners of Captain Claude's lips a smile came. He knew that Donald's peacemaking was a stroke of policy whose cause was fear of the future.

The San Pedroan was not going to interfere on a side that threatened to result disastrously to him in case of a collision with the detective and his two backers, Mark Million and Cyclone.

"Just as you say, Captain Donald," answered

Captain Claude. "If the game is accounted a draw, I take the prisoner. If we fight for him, my word for it he will never treat the survivors at the bar of El Paradiso!"

Donald the Dark turned upon the crowd at his back.

"It is for an old crime in New York," he asserted, in lowered voice. "I guess he ought to go back thar to answer for it. It's better to be able to drink at the counter than to be shot down for a man who's chased a young girl and her father across the ocean."

Certain looks told that the majority of the crowd shared Captain Donald's opinion, and interpreting these as he read them, the boss of San Pedro looked at the detective waiting quietly for the result in front of his prisoner.

"It is a draw. Get him to New York if you can!" he cried out, with a wave of his hand.

Coldgrip bowed.

He knew that something more than the Californian's love of justice had turned the scales in favor of peace, and he had but to feel the six-shooters in his grip to recognize the potent argument.

Colonel Redpath saw the crowd walk off with feelings not difficult to analyze. He felt that San Pedro was from that moment against him, and a mad desire to punish Dark Donald's change of front swelled in his bosom.

"Come," said Captain Coldgrip, turning upon the prisoner and his guards. "We will look after Coral and then move off."

The eyes of the two sleuths met at that moment, and Colonel Redpath leaned slightly toward his rival trailer.

"Take me away from this nest of recreants," he hissed. "These San Pedro sun-lizards haven't the courage of a child. I would be better off if I had never seen the sun shine on their shanties!"

A short time later the Atlantic detective halted in front of Sancho's cabin, and opened the door.

"It is Captain Claude," cried a woman, who turned upon him as the light fell on his face. "Ah! this is not War Eagle, and I can't cut a rope and steal a man. Where is the palace scorpion?"

"Just outside."

"But you have not fought San Pedro?"

"There is to be no rescue."

Coral came forward and caught the detective's wrist.

"You won't give me a chance—just one?" she exclaimed.

"Not one. The prisoner belongs to the justice that waits for him by the Atlantic."

"My oath must be kept!"

"What of mine?" smiled the detective.

Coral dropped her hand.

"Take him," she said, stepping back. "Take him to the sea, and let Mortimer see his father avenged. Take him to Silver Deck, and let Grant Thurston gloat over the end in store for the Russian monster. But remember that, at any time, I am liable to reappear on the scene. Don't forget the swoop at War Eagle Camp!"

Coral ended with a laugh, then baughtly refused the hand the detective extended, and the two parted.

Colonel Redpath went from San Pedro under guard. Among the escort was a young man who watched him with the vision of a hawk.

It was Mortimer.

And with the same company was a beautiful young girl who had been brought into San Pedro by the boy Juan, and the little party once more beheld Medora, the exile's child.

The cunning little fellow had been successful in his last trip to the mountains, and the girl who had effected her escape from the Russian's cage, had been found by him, lost and ready to despair.

Not long afterward Grant Thurston had the pleasure of folding his daughter to his breast, and that in the presence of the man who had wrecked his life and driven him from the land of his adoption.

But that man was no longer powerful, and the hands that had inflicted sorrows on many, could not draw blood from a child.

The great detective's trail did not end until he suddenly reappeared in New York, with the man who long before had taken the life of Ralph Romaine, and in the courts was told the thrilling chase for a Russian count and sleuth across the continent.

After the sentence, which brought a gleam of triumph to Mortimer's eyes, a woman bounded from the spectators and threw herself with the fury of a tigress upon the prisoner.

Their brightness was answer enough for Colonel Redpath, for a smile came to his lips.

"Well, I did not go to the police that night, and because I did not Captain Coldgrip promised Mortimer to hunt me down if it took the balance of his natural life. He forgot that he had a sleuth to play against him. He did not know till he met Grant Thurston and Medora at Silver Deck, that the old chief of the czar's secret police was his antagonist. Ah! he has learned that it is one thing to chase a man and another to catch him. He is yet to learn that

the tiger sometimes hunts the hunter. Get ready to deliver the two messages, Donald. I am going."

Several minutes later Colonel Redpath passed quickly into the saloon and out of the front door.

Donald was with him.

"I'd like the to see captain once more," he exclaimed.

"You would shoot him on sight," whispered Donald.

"No, I think not. To encounter him in the death grapple here at this time would bring Coral out with her revolver. I have no desire to meet the woman just now. I will entrap her in the mountains, for she will surely take my trail."

A short distance from El Paradiso Donald kept the several blooded horses on which he sometimes exercised round about San Pedro.

One of these animals, fresh and swift, was to carry Colonel Redpath away, but the bargain was that the horse was to be returned in good condition, or an enormous price paid for it.

"How is Jose?" suddenly cried Donald, as the figure of his bartender rose before him at the door of the stable.

The Russian sprung to Jose's side.

"You must go at once!" cried Jose, clutching the Russian's arm.

"Why at once?"

"They have come back."

"We know that, Jose. It is the same news you delivered awhile ago at El Paradiso."

"The others I mean this time."

"What others?"

"The two men who followed the boys who went off to rescue you."

The Russian turned a look upon Donald.

"He means the Colorado sports who came to San Pedro the night you fell into Captain Coldgrip's hands. One of them is the man who shot the jumper at Yellow Jacket—"

"Mark Million!" interrupted the hunted Russian. "Where are they, Jose?"

Before the barkeeper could speak, he started back with a low cry which sent one of Colonel Redpath's hands to his belt.

"The man out yonder!" whispered Jose.

"I see him."

Donald the Dark dropped the rein of the horse he had just saddled, and looked at the foreign sleuth.

Even in the starlight he could see the expression of firmness which had settled on his face.

"Hands up, all of you!" came from the lips of the person suddenly discovered by Jose.

"That is Coral!" muttered the Russian sleuth.

"No, a man," said Donald.

The answer was the lifting of a hand, but that hand was Colonel Redpath's, and in it was the revolver kept ready for his foes.

Within the next breath a jet of fire was seen by the three men, and the colonel recoiled a pace.

"A poor shot, my huntress queen!" he laughed, walking boldly toward the person who had fired.

Again the revolver spoke, but the Russian kept on.

"At the head if you want that man!" rung out a strange voice.

"Merciful heavens! I forgot the vest of steel!" and the speaker threw down the revolver with a mad cry.

"A bad moment to forget so important a thing!" laughed Colonel Redpath, and then a bound carried him to the astonished woman who in an instant was in his merciless grip.

"No! my queen of the brand, expect no mercy now!" he hissed.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE LONG CHASE ENDS.

COLONEL REDPATH had not moved rapidly enough to avoid meeting the avenger who had come back to San Pedro for the purpose of ending the hunt by one crushing play.

He had escaped her among the mountains, but he should not succeed the second time.

Coral had left Sancho's house for the purpose of finding him as speedily as possible, for the woman feared that Captain Coldgrip would get between her and her quarry.

When she found herself in the hands of the man whose bullet-proof vest had saved him for the time, she felt a nameless thrill sweep through her frame.

The steel vest had been driven from her thoughts by the excitement of the supreme moment, and when the voice recalled it after her second shot, she felt that she had failed, and the revolver went to the ground.

Was it for this that she had hunted the Russian? Had fate decreed that she should perish in the grip of the villain who had marked her for life in the dominion of the czar?

Coral struggled in Colonel Redpath's hands.

She saw the flashing eyes of the Muscovite sleuth, and felt the fingers sinking into her throat, causing myriads of stars to dance before her vision.

Donald the Dark was not going to interfere, and Jose had already fled.

"You sought out your doom!" exclaimed Colonel Redpath. "You lost me in the mountains at the three huts where you heated your iron; but you find me ready and eager for you in San Pedro!"

There was no answer beyond a fierce look which spoke volumes of hatred, and it did not relax the grim Russian's grip.

At this juncture a man landed at Paul Demidoff's side.

He came from the night that overshadowed all, but the foreign ferret saw his eyes and the muzzle of a six shooter at the same time.

"Captain Claude!" cried the Russian, and then he dropped the half-conscious woman and turned on his new foe.

"Do you forget that your head is not protected, colonel," smiled the New York detective. "I shall not try conclusions with the vest of steel, though it is said that a forty-two at short range will bore it through. You can lift a hand if you wish—you can draw the weapon that peeps above your pocket; but I will not answer for the result!"

The czar's spy did not move. He stood face to face with the man who had not relinquished pursuit from the beginning. He saw that the biggest hand yet held in the game was in Captain Coldgrip's possession.

A hundred people uttered cries of horror.

The woman had something in her hand!

The next second a man reached Colonel Redpath's side, and the frenzied hand which the woman threw above her head was clutched at the wrist in a grip of steel.

"Not yet, and never!" said the man, holding the assailant off and smiling in her face. "I've been waiting for you, Coral. You came at the last moment. I have just left the Scorpion's trail. The hunt is ended!"

The eyes glittered, but their owner submitted, and Coral walked out between two officers, silent and beaten.

The brand would never burn the Russian's flesh, and she could go back to cast-off Cyclone, or to new scenes and new intrigues.

Grant Thurston and Medora, of course, went back to the East. So did Captain Mark Million, who wanted to witness Claude Coldgrip's final triumph. Cyclone stopped at Silver Deck, and, with a stake which he got from the very man he once attempted to kill in its suburbs, he resolved to fight for fortune in the wild West.

Truth to tell, Cyclone expected to be paid in bitter coin for his ball in Captain Coldgrip's hat- rim; but the detective forgave him the shot for his last service, and left him more than satisfied.

The friendship which grew up between Medora and Mortimer resulted as friendships often do, and a happy event took place soon after the return.

Donald still runs El Paradiso and smokes in the sun, while Juan, the boy hawk of San Pedro has transferred his abode to Medora's home by the Atlantic.

Yellow Jacket's jumping-bouts have lost caste since the killing of its champion, but Silver Deck has gained fame as a mining town.

It hides no exiles now.

The man of our story, the cool, level-headed, tireless central figure, is to be found at times in a little Broadway office, ready at an hour's notice to chase a desperado across the continent.

And in New York to-day no man is more feared nor better known than Captain Coldgrip.

THE END.

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